

THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA



"SHE STOPPED, LIKE A CLOCK."

THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA

A COMEDY IN CHAPTERS

BY

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VITÆ POST-SCENIA CELANT—*Lucretius*

WITH ELEVEN ILLUSTRATIONS

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CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.



CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A STREET IN ANGLEBURY—A HEATH NEAR— INSIDE THE 'OLD FOX INN'	1
II. CHRISTOPHER'S HOUSE—SANDBOURNE TOWN— SANDBOURNE MOOR	23
III. SANDBOURNE MOOR (<i>continued</i>)	41
IV. SANDBOURNE PIER—ROAD TO WYNDWAY—BALL- ROOM IN WYNDWAY HOUSE	48
V. AT THE WINDOW—THE ROAD HOME . . .	59
VI. THE SHORE BY WYNDWAY	67
VII. THE DINING-ROOM OF A TOWN HOUSE—THE BUTLER'S PANTRY	76
VIII. CHRISTOPHER'S LODGINGS—THE GROUNDS ABOUT ROOKINGTON	94
IX. A VILLAGE INN—ROOKINGTON DRIVE—CHRIS- TOPHER'S ROOMS	102
X. A LADY'S DRAWING-ROOMS—ETHELBERTA'S DRESSING-ROOM	109
XI. LADY PETHERWIN'S HOUSE	123
XII. SANDBOURNE AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD . .	130
XIII. SOME LONDON STREETS	136

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIV. ARROWTHORNE PARK AND LODGE . . .	141
XV. THE LODGE (<i>continued</i>)—THE COPSE BEHIND	147
XVI. A TURNPIKE ROAD	166
XVII. AN INNER ROOM AT THE LODGE . . .	172
XVIII. A LARGE PUBLIC HALL.	178
XIX. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE	188
XX. NEAR SANDBOURNE—LONDON STREETS—ETHEL- BERTA'S	204
XXI. ETHELBERTA'S DRAWING-ROOM . . .	215
XXII. THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF THE HALL—THE ROAD HOME	219
XXIII. A STREET—NEIGH'S ROOMS—CHRISTOPHER'S ROOMS	225
XXIV. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE	235
XXV. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE (<i>continued</i>) . . .	252
XXVI. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE (<i>continued</i>)—THE BRITISH MUSEUM	263
XXVII. THE ROYAL ACADEMY—THE HAREFIELD ES- TATE.	278
XXVIII. ETHELBERTA'S DRAWING-ROOM . . .	294
XXIX. MRS. BELMAINE'S—CRIPPLEGATE CHURCH .	306

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.



‘ SHE STOPPED LIKE A CLOCK ’	<i>Frontispiece</i>
‘ WELL, WHAT DID YOU THINK OF MY POEMS ? ’ <i>to face page</i>	68
ROUND HER, LEANING AGAINST BRANCHES, OR PROSTRATE ON THE GROUND, WERE FIVE OR SIX INDIVIDUALS	„ 148
‘ GOODNESS ! HOW QUICK YOU WERE ! ’	„ 218
IT WAS A TENDER TIME	„ 272
THE HAREFIELD ESTATE	„ 289

THE
HAND OF ETHELBERTA.

CHAPTER I.

A STREET IN ANGLEBURY—A HEATH NEAR—INSIDE
THE ‘OLD FOX INN.’

YOUNG Mrs. Petherwin stepped from the door of an old though popular inn in a Wessex town to take a country walk. By her look and carriage she appeared to belong to that gentle order of society which has no worldly sorrow except when its jewellery gets stolen; but, as a fact not generally known, her claim to distinction was rather one of brains than of blood. She was a respectable butler's daughter, and began life as a baby christened Ethelberta after an infant of title who does not come into the story at all, having merely furnished to Ethelberta's mother a means of occupying herself as head nurse. She became teacher in a school, was praised by examiners, admired by gentlemen, not admired by gentlewomen, was touched up with accom-

plishments by masters who were coaxed into painstaking by her many graces rather than by her few coins, and, entering a mansion as governess to the daughter thereof, was stealthily married by the son. He, a minor like herself, died from a chill caught during the wedding tour, and a few weeks later was followed into the grave by Sir Ralph Petherwin, his unforgiving father, who had bequeathed his wealth to his wife absolutely.

These calamities were a sufficient reason to Lady Petherwin for pardoning all concerned. She took by the hand the forlorn Ethelberta—who seemed rather a detached bride than a widow—and finished her education by placing her for two or three years in a boarding-school at Bonn. Latterly she had brought the girl to England to live under her roof as daughter and companion, the condition attached being that Ethelberta was never openly to recognise her poor relations.

The elegant young lady, as she had a full right to be called if she cared for the definition, arrested all the local attention when she emerged into the summer-evening light with that diadem-and-sceptre bearing—many people for reasons of heredity discovering such graces only in those whose vestibules are lined with ancestral mail, forgetting that a bear may be taught to dance. While this air of hers lasted, even the inanimate objects in the street appeared to know that she was there; but from a way she had of carelessly overthrowing her dignity by versatile moods, one could not

calculate upon its presence to a certainty when she was round corners or in little lanes which demanded no repression of animal spirits.

‘Well to be sure!’ exclaimed a milkman, regarding her. ‘We should freeze in our beds if ’twere not for the sun, and, dang me ! if she isn’t a pretty piece. A man could make a meal between them eyes and chin—eh, hostler? Odd nation dang my old sides if he couldn’t!’

The speaker, who had been carrying a pair of pails on a yoke, deposited them upon the edge of the pavement in front of the inn, and straightened his back to an excruciating perpendicular. His remarks had been addressed to a rickety person, wearing a waistcoat of that preternatural length from the top to the bottom button which prevails among men who have to do with horses. He was sweeping straws from the carriage-way beneath the stone arch that formed a passage to the stables behind.

‘Never mind the cursing and swearing, or somebody who’s never out of hearing may clap yer name down in his black book afore you know it,’ said the hostler, also pausing, and lifting his eyes to the mulioned and transomed windows and moulded parapet above him—not to study them as features of ancient architecture, but just to give as healthful a stretch to the eyes as his acquaintance had done to his back. ‘Michael, a old man like you ought to think about

other things, and not be looking two ways at your time of life. Pouncing upon young flesh like a carrion crow—'tis a vile thing in a old man.'

'Tis, and yet 'tis not, for 'tis a naterel taste,' said the milkman, again surveying Ethelberta, who had now paused upon a bridge in full view, to look down the river. 'Now, if a poor needy feller like myself could only catch her alone when she's dressed up to the nines for some grand party, and carry her off to some lonely place—sakes, what a pot of jewels and goold things I warrant he'd find about her! 'Twould pay en for his trouble.'

'I don't dispute the picter; but 'tis sly and untimely to think such roguery. Though I've had thoughts like it, 'tis true, about high women—Lord forgive me for't.'

'And that figure of fashion standing there is a widow woman, so I hear?'

'Lady—not a penny less than lady. Ay, a thing of twenty-one or thereabouts.'

'A widow lady and twenty-one. 'Tis a backward age for a body who's so forward in her state of life.'

'Well, be that as 'twill, here's my showings for her age. She was about the figure of two or three-and-twenty when 'a got off coach last night, 'tired out wi' boaming about the country; and nineteen this morning when she came downstairs after a sleep round the

clock and a clane washed face; so I thought to myself, twenty-one, I thought.'

'And what's the young woman's name, make so bold, hostler?'

'Ay, and the house were all in a stoor with her and the old woman, and their boxes and camp kettles, that they carry to wash in because hand-basons bain't big enough, and I don't know what all; and t'other folk stopping here were no more than dirt thencefor'ard.'

'I suppose they've come out of some noble city a long way herefrom?'

'And there was her hair up in buckle as if she'd never seen a clay-cold man at all. However, to cut a long story short, all I know besides about 'em is that the name upon their luggage is Lady Petherwin, and she's the widow of a city gentleman-shopman, who was made a Knight Templar for being a man of valour in the Lord Mayor's Show.'

'Who's that chap in the gaiters and pack at his back, come out of the door but now?' said the milkman, nodding towards a figure of that description who had just emerged from the inn and trudged off in the direction taken by the lady—now out of sight.

'Chap in the gaiters? Chok' it all—why the father of that nobleman that you call chap in the gaiters used to be hand in glove with half the Queen's court.'

'What d'ye tell o'?'

'That man's father was one of the mayor and cor-

poration of Sandbourne, and was that familiar with men of money, that he'd slap 'em upon the shoulder as you or I or any other poor fool would the clerk of the parish.'

'Oh, what's my lordlin's name, make so bold, then?'

'Ay, the toppermost class now-a-days have left off the use of wheels for the good of their constitutions, so they traipse and walk for many years up foreign hills, where you can see nothing but snow and fog, till there's no more left to walk up; and if they reach home alive, and h'an't got too old and weared out, they walk and see a little of their own parishes. So they tower about with a pack and a stick and a clane white pocket-handkerchief over their hats just as you see he's got on his. He's been staying here a night, and is off now again. "Young man, young man," I think to myself, "if your shoulders were bent like a bandy and your knees bowed out as mine be, till there is not an inch of straight bone or gristle in 'ee, th' wouldstn't go doing hard work for play 'a b'lieve.'"

'True, true, upon my song. Such a pain as I have had in the small of my back all this day to be sure; words don't know what shipwreck I suffer in this back o' mine—that they do not! And what was this young widow lady's maiden name, then, hostler? Folk have been peeping after her, that's true; but they don't seem to know much about her family.'

‘And while I’ve tended horses fifty year that other folk might straddle ’em, here I be now not a penny the better! Often-times, when I see so many good things about, I feel inclined to help myself in common justice to my pocket.

Work hard and be poor,
Do nothing and get more.

But I draw in the horns of my mind and think to myself, “Forbear, John Hostler, forbear!”—Her maiden name? Faith, I don’t know the woman’s maiden name, though she said to me, “Good evening, John;” but I had no memory of ever seeing her afore—no, no more than the dead inside church-hatch—where I shall soon be likewise—I had not. “Ay, my nabs,” I think to myself, “more know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows.”’

‘More know Tom Fool—what rambling old canticle is it you say, hostler?’ enquired the milkman, lifting his ear. ‘Let’s have it again—a good saying well spit out is a Christmas fire to my withered heart. More know Tom Fool—’

‘Than Tom Fool knows,’ said the hostler.

‘Ah! That’s the very feeling I’ve feeled over and over again, hostler, but not in such gifted language. ’Tis a thought I’ve had in me more or less for years, and never could lick into shape!—O-ho-ho-ho! Splendid! Say it again, hostler, say it again! To hear my

own poor notion that had no name brought into form like that—I wouldn't ha' lost it for the world! More know Tom Fool than—thar—h-ho-ho-ho-ho!

'Don't let your cheerful soul break out in such a heathen uproar, for heaven's sake, or folk will surely think you've been laughing at the lady and gentleman. Well, here's at it again—Night t'ee, Michael.' And the hostler went on with his sweeping.

'Night t'ee, hostler, I must move too,' said the milkman, shouldering his yoke, and walking off; and there reached the inn in a gradual diminuendo, as he receded up the street, shaking his head convulsively, 'More know—Tom fool—than Tom fool—ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!'

The 'Old Fox,' as the inn or hotel was called which of late years had become the fashion among tourists, because of the absence from its precincts of all that was fashionable and new, stood on the border of the town without having been built there. In the course of time houses had been pulled down at one end of the place, and new ones erected at the other, which lay towards the railway station: thus the inn had passed from middle to outside in consequence of its sheer unchangeableness, just as in the mobility of parties a consistent man of long life may, somewhat to his surprise, be a person of advanced views in youth and of retrograde principles in old age, by the mere fact of remaining just the same.

Standing now as the northern bulwark of the town, the hostel formed a corner where in winter the winds whistled and assembled their forces previous to plunging helter-skelter along the streets. In summer it was a fresh and pleasant spot, convenient for such quiet characters as sojourned there to study the geology and beautiful natural features of the country round.

The lady whose appearance had asserted a difference between herself and the Anglebury people, without too clearly showing what that difference was, passed out of the high-road in a few moments after leaving the bridge, and she soon got into a lonely valley, which, at its further end, spread out into a flat heath. She had walked to the beginning of this dead level, watching the base of a cloud as it closed down upon the line of a distant ridge, like an upper upon a lower eyelid, shutting in the gaze of the evening sun. She was about to return before dusk came on, when she heard a commotion in the air immediately behind and above her head. The saunterer looked up and saw a wild-duck flying along with the greatest violence, just in its rear being another large bird, which a countryman would have pronounced to be one of the biggest duck-hawks that he had ever beheld. The hawk neared its intended victim, and the duck screamed and redoubled its efforts.

Ethelberta impulsively started off in a rapid run that would have made a little dog bark with delight

and run after, her object being, if possible, to see the end of this desperate struggle for a life so small and unheard-of. Her stateliness went away, and it could be forgiven for not remaining; for her feet suddenly became as quick as fingers, and she raced along over the uneven ground with such force of tread that, being a woman slightly heavier than gossamer, her patent heels punched little D's in the soil with unerring accuracy wherever it was bare, crippled the heather-twigs where it was not, and sucked the swampy places with a sound of quick kisses.

Her rate of advance was not to be compared with that of the two birds, though she went swiftly enough to keep them well in sight in such an open place as that around her, having at one point in the journey been so near that she could hear the whisk of the duck's feathers against the wind as it lifted and lowered its wings. When the bird seemed to be but a few yards from its enemy she saw it strike downwards, and after a level flight of a quarter of a minute, vanish. The hawk swooped after, and Ethelberta now perceived a whitely shining oval of still water, looking amid the swarthy level of the heath like a hole through to a nether sky.

Into this large pond, which the duck had been making towards from the beginning of its precipitate flight, it had dived out of sight. The excited and breathless runner was in a few moments close enough

to see the disappointed hawk hovering and floating in the air as if waiting for the reappearance of its prey, upon which grim pastime it was so intent that by creeping along softly she was enabled to get very near the edge of the pool and witness clearly the conclusion of the episode. Whenever the duck was under the necessity of showing its head to breathe, the other bird would dart towards it, invariably too late, however; for the diver was far too experienced in the rough humour of the buzzard family at this game to come up twice near the same spot, unaccountably emerging from opposite sides of the pool in succession, and bobbing again by the time its adversary reached each place; so that at length the hawk gave up the contest and flew away, a satanic moodiness being almost perceptible in the motion of its wings.

The young lady now looked around her for the first time, and began to perceive that she had run a long distance—very much farther than she had originally intended to come. Her eyes had been so long fixed upon the hawk, as it soared against the bright and mottled field of sky, that on regarding the heather and plain again it was as if she had returned to a half-forgotten region after an absence, and the whole prospect was darkened to one uniform shade of approaching night. She began at once to retrace her steps, but having been indiscriminately wheeling round the pond to get a good view of the performance, and having

followed no path thither, she found the proper direction of her journey to be a matter of some uncertainty.

‘Surely,’ she said to herself. ‘I faced the west at starting:’ and yet on walking now with her back where her face had been set, she did not approach the notch in the horizon which was all that remained of the valley by the town. Thus dubiously, but with little real concern, she walked on till the evening lights began to turn to dusk, and the shadows to darkness.

Presently in front of her Ethelberta saw a white spot in the shade, and it proved to be in some way attached to the head of a man who was coming towards her out of a slight depression in the ground. It was as yet too early in the evening to be afraid, but it was too late to be altogether courageous; and with balanced sensations Ethelberta kept her eye sharply upon him as he rose by degrees into view. The peculiar arrangement of his hat and pugree soon struck her as being the same that she had casually noticed hanging on a peg in one of the rooms of the ‘Old Fox’ the night before, and when he came close she saw that his arms diminished to a peculiar smallness at their junction with his shoulders, like those of a doll, a phenomenon which was explained by their being girt round at that point with the straps of a knapsack that he carried behind him. Encouraged by the probability that he, like herself, was staying or had been staying at the ‘Old Fox,’

she said, 'Can you tell me if this is the way back to Anglebury?'

'It is one way ; but the nearest is in this direction,' said the tourist—the same who had been criticised by the two old men.

At hearing him speak all the delicate activities in the young lady's person stood still : she stopped like a clock. When she could again fence with the perception which had caused all this, she breathed.

'Mr. Julian !' she exclaimed. The words were uttered in a way which would have told anybody in a moment that here lay something connected with the light of other days.

'Ah, Mrs. Petherwin!—Yes, I am Mr. Julian—though that can matter very little, I should think, after all these years, and what has passed.'

No remark was returned to this rugged reply, and he continued unconcernedly, 'Shall I put you in the path—it is just here?'

'If you please.'

'Come with me, then.'

She walked in silence at his heels, not a word passing between them all the way : the only noises which came from the two were the brushing of her dress and his gaiters against the heather, or the smart rap of a stray flint against his boot.

They had now reached a little knoll, and he turned abruptly : 'That is Anglebury—just where you see

those lights. The path down there is the one you must follow : it leads round the hill yonder and directly into the town.'

'Thank you,' she murmured, and found that he had never removed his eyes from her since speaking, keeping them fixed with mathematical exactness upon one point in her face. She moved a little to go on her way ; he moved a little less—to go on his.

'Good night,' said Mr. Julian.

The moment, upon the very face of it, was critical ; and yet it was one of those which have to wait for a future before they acquire a definite character as good or bad. We often figure in junctures about which we can foresee that 'O that time !' will some day be our habitual thought, even while we do not at all foresee the tone, bright or mournful, that the thought will wear.

Thus much would have been obvious to any outsider ; it may have been doubly so to Ethelberta, for she gave back more than she had got, replying, 'Good-bye—if you are going to say no more.'

Then it struck Mr. Julian : 'What can I say ? You are nothing to me. . . . I could forgive a woman doing anything for spite, except marrying for spite.'

'The connection of that with our present meeting does not appear, unless it refers to what you have done. It does not refer to me.'

‘I am not married; you are.’

She did not contradict him, as she might have done. ‘Christopher,’ she said at last, ‘this is how it is: you knew too much of me to respect me, and too little to pity me. A half knowledge of another’s life mostly does injustice to the life half known.’

‘Then since circumstances forbid my knowing you more, I must do my best to know you less, and elevate my opinion of your nature by forgetting what it consists in,’ he said, in a voice from which all feeling was polished away.

‘If I did not know that bitterness had more to do with those words than judgment, I—should be—bitter too! You never knew half about me; you only knew me as a governess; you little think what my beginnings were.’

‘I have guessed. I have many times told myself that your early life was superior to your position when I first met you. I think I may say without presumption that I recognise a lady by birth when I see her, even under reverses of an extreme kind. And certainly there is this to be said, that the fact of having been bred in a wealthy home does slightly redeem an attempt to attain to such a one again.’

Ethelberta smiled a smile of many meanings.

‘However, we are wasting words,’ he resumed, cheerfully. ‘It is better for us to part as we met, and continue to be the strangers that we have become to each

other. I owe you an apology for having been betrayed into more feeling than I had a right to show, and let us part friends. Good night Mrs. Petherwin, and success to you. We may meet again some day, I hope.'

'Good night,' she said, extending her hand. He touched it, turned about, and in a short time nothing remained of him but quick regular brushings against the heather in the deep broad shadow of the moor.

Ethelberta slowly moved on in the direction that he had pointed out. This meeting had surprised her in several ways. First, there was the conjuncture itself; but more than that was the fact that he had not parted from her with any of the tragic resentment that she had from time to time imagined for that scene if it ever occurred. Yet there was really nothing wonderful in this: it is part of the generous nature of a bachelor to be not indisposed, after years of separation, to forgive a portionless sweetheart who, by marrying elsewhere, has deprived him of the bliss of being obliged to marry her himself. Ethelberta would have been disappointed quite had there not been a comforting development of exasperation in the middle part of his talk; but after all it formed a poor substitute for the loving hatred she had expected.

When she reached the hotel the lamp over the door showed a face a little flushed, but the agitation which at first had possessed her was gone to a mere nothing. In the hall she met a slender woman wearing

a silk dress of that peculiar black which in sunlight proclaims itself to have once seen better days as a brown, and days even better than those as a lavender, green, or blue.

‘Menlove,’ said the lady, ‘did you notice if any gentleman observed and followed me when I left the hotel to go for a walk this evening?’

The lady’s-maid, thus suddenly pulled up in a night forage after lovers, put a hand to her forehead to show that there was no mistake about her having begun to meditate on receiving orders to that effect, and said at last, ‘You once told me, ma’am, if you recollect, that when you were dressed, I was not to go staring out of the window after you as if you were a doll I had just manufactured and sent round for sale.’

‘Yes, so I did.’

‘So I didn’t see if anybody followed you this evening.’

‘Then did you hear any gentleman arrive here by the late train last night?’

‘O no, ma’am—how could I?’ said Mrs. Menlove—an exclamation which was more apposite than her mistress suspected, considering that the speaker, after retiring from duty, had slipped down her dark skirt to reveal a light, puffed, and festooned one, put on a hat and feather, together with several pennyweights of metal in the form of rings, brooches, and earrings—all in a time whilst one could count a hundred—and

enjoyed half an hour of prime courtship by an honourable young waiter of the town, who had proved constant as the magnet to the pole for the space of the day and a half that she had known him, returning home then and falling asleep the instant she was in bed—small blame to Mrs. Menlove for her enterprise.

Going at once upstairs, Ethelberta ran down the passage, and after some hesitation softly opened the door of the sitting-room in the best suite of apartments that the inn could boast of.

In this room sat an elderly lady writing by the light of two candles with green shades. Well knowing, as it seemed, who the intruder was, she continued her occupation, and her visitor advanced and stood beside the table. The old lady wore her spectacles low down her cheek, her glance being depressed to about the slope of her straight white nose in order to look through them. Her mouth was pursed up to almost a youthful shape as she formed the letters with her pen, and a slight move of the lip accompanied every downstroke. There were two large antique rings on her forefinger, against which the quill rubbed in moving backwards and forwards, thereby causing a secondary noise rivaling the primary one of the nib upon the paper.

‘Mamma,’ said the younger lady, ‘here I am at last.’

A writer’s mind in the midst of a sentence being like a ship at sea, knowing no rest or comfort till safely

piloted into the harbour of a full stop, Lady Petherwin just replied with 'What,' in an occupied tone, not rising to interrogation. After signing her name to the letter, she raised her eyes.

'Why, how late you are, Ethelberta, and how heated you look!' she said. 'I have been quite alarmed about you. What do you say has happened?'

The great, chief, and altogether eclipsing thing that had happened was the accidental meeting with an old lover whom she had once quarrelled with; and Ethelberta's honesty would have delivered the tidings at once, had not, unfortunately, all the rest of her attributes been dead against that act, for the old lady's sake even more than for her own.

'I saw a great cruel bird chasing a harmless duck!' she exclaimed, innocently. 'And I ran after to see what the end of it would be—much further than I had any idea of going. However, the duck came to a pond, and in running round it to see the end of the fight, I could not remember which way I had come.'

'Mercy!' said her mother-in-law, lifting her large eyelids, heavy as window-shutters, and spreading out her fingers like the horns of a snail. 'You might have sunk up to your knees and got lost in that swampy place—such a time of night, too. What a tomboy you are! And how did you find your way home after all?'

'Oh, some man showed me the way, and then I had no difficulty, and after that I came along leisurely.'

‘I thought you had been running all the way ; you look so warm.’

‘It is a warm evening . . . Yes, and I have been thinking of old times as I walked along,’ she said, ‘and how people’s positions in life alter. Have I not heard you say that while I was at Bonn, at school, some family that we had known had their household broken up when the father died, and that the children went away you didn’t know where?’

‘Do you mean the Julians?’

‘Yes, that was the name.’

‘Why, of course you know it was the Julians. Young Julian had a day or two’s fancy for you one summer, had he not?—just after you came to us, at the same time, or just before it, that my poor boy and you were so desperately attached to each other.’

‘Oh yes, I recollect,’ said Ethelberta. ‘And he had a sister, I think. I wonder where they went to live after the family collapse.’

‘I do not know,’ said Lady Petherwin, taking up another sheet of paper. ‘I have a dim notion that the son, who had been brought up to no profession, became a teacher of music in some country town—music having always been his hobby. But the facts are not very distinct in my memory.’ And she dipped her pen for another letter.

Ethelberta, with a rather fallen countenance, then left her mother-in-law, and went where all ladies are

supposed to go when they want to torment their minds in comfort—to her own room. Here she thoughtfully sat down awhile, and some time later she rang for her maid.

‘Menlove,’ she said, without looking towards a rustle and half a footstep that had just come in at the door, but leaning back in her chair and speaking towards the corner of the looking-glass, ‘will you go down and find out if any gentleman named Julian has been staying in this house? Get to know it, I mean, Menlove, not by directly enquiring; you have ways of getting to know things, have you not? If the devoted George were here now, he would help——’

‘George was nothing to me, ma’am.’

‘James, then.’

‘And I only had James for a week or ten days: when I found he was a married man, I encouraged his addresses very little indeed.’

‘If you had encouraged him tooth and nail, you couldn’t have fumed more at the loss of him. But please to go and make that enquiry, will you, Menlove?’

In a few minutes Ethelberta’s woman was back again. ‘A gentleman of that name stayed here last night, and left this afternoon.’

‘Will you find out his address?’

Now the lady’s maid had already been quick-witted enough to find out that, and indeed all about him; but it chanced that a fashionable illustrated

weekly paper had just been sent from the bookseller's, and being in want of a little time to look it over before it reached her mistress's hands, Mrs. Menlove retired, as if to go and ask the question—to stand meanwhile under the gas-lamp in the passage, inspecting the fascinating engravings. But as time will not wait for tire-women, a natural length of absence soon elapsed, and she returned again and said,

‘His address is, Upper Street, Sandbourne.’

‘Thank you, that will do,’ replied her mistress.

The hour grew later, and that dreamy period came round when ladies' fancies, that have lain shut up close as their fans during the day, begin to assert themselves anew. At this time a good guess at Ethelberta's thoughts might have been made from her manner of passing the minutes away. Instead of reading, entering notes in her diary, or doing any ordinary thing, she walked to and fro, curled her pretty nether lip within her pretty upper one a great many times, made a cradle of her locked fingers, and paused with fixed eyes where the walls of the room set limits upon her walk to look at nothing but a picture within her mind.

CHAPTER II.

CHRISTOPHER'S HOUSE—SANDBOURNE TOWN—
SANDBOURNE MOOR.

DURING the wet autumn of the same year, the postman passed one morning as usual into a plain street that ran through the landward portion of Sandbourne, a coast town and watering-place not many miles from Anglebury. He knocked at the door of a flat-faced white house, having two windows on each floor, so that the front altogether was like a large six-of-spades. The door was opened by a slight, thoughtful young man, with his hat on, just then coming out, and there was put into his hands a book packet, addressed, 'Christopher Julian, Esq.'

Christopher took the package upstairs, opened it with curiosity, and discovered within a green volume of poems, by an anonymous writer, the title-page bearing the inscription, 'Metres by Me.' The book was new, though it was cut, and it appeared to have been looked into. The young man, after turning it over and exclaiming, 'Who the deuce sent this, I

wonder?' laid it on the table and went his way, being in haste to fulfil his engagements for the day.

In the evening, on returning home from his occupations, he sat himself down easily to read the newly-arrived volume. The winds of this uncertain season were snarling in the chimneys, and drops of rain spat themselves into the fire, revealing plainly that the young man's room was not far enough from the top of the house to admit of a twist in the flue, and revealing darkly a little more, if that social rule-of-three inverse, the higher in lodgings the lower in pocket, were applicable here. However, the aspect of the room, though homely, was cheerful, a somewhat contradictory group of furniture suggesting that the collection consisted of waifs and strays from a former home, large and long established, the grimy faces of the old articles exercising a curious and subduing effect on the bright faces of the new. An oval mirror of rococo workmanship, and a heavy cabinet-piano with a cornice like that of an Egyptian temple, adjoined a harmonium of yesterday, and a harp that was almost as new. Printed music of the last century, and manuscript music of the previous evening, lay there in such quantity as to endanger the tidiness of a retreat which was indeed only saved from a chronic state of litter by a pair of hands that sometimes played, with the lightness of breezes, about the sewing-machine standing in a remote corner—if any corner could be called remote in a room so small.

Fire lights and shades from the shaking flames struck in a butterfly flutter on the underparts of the mantel-shelf, and upon the reader's cheek as he sat. Presently, and all at once, a much greater intentness pervaded his face: he turned back again, and read anew the subject that had arrested his eyes. He was a man whose countenance varied with his mood, though it kept somewhat in the rear of that mood. He looked sad when he felt almost serene, and only serene when he felt quite cheerful. It is a habit people acquire who have had repressing experiences.

A faint smile and flush now lightened his face, and jumping up he opened the door and exclaimed, 'Faith! will you come here for a moment?'

A prompt step was heard on the stairs, and the young person addressed as Faith entered the room. She was small in figure, and bore less in the form of her features than in their shades when changing from expression to expression the evidence that she was his sister.

'Faith—I want your opinion. But, stop, read this first.' He laid his finger upon a page in the book, and placed it in her hand.

The girl drew from her pocket a little green leather sheath, worn at the edges to whitey-brown, and out of that a pair of spectacles, unconsciously looking round the room for a moment as she did so, as if to ensure that no stranger saw her in the act of using them.

Here a weakness was uncovered at once; it was a small, pretty, and natural one; indeed, as weaknesses go in the great world, it might almost have been called a commendable trait. She then began to read, without sitting down.

These 'Metres by Me' composed a collection of soft and marvellously musical rhymes, of a nature known as the *vers de société*. The lines presented a series of playful defences of the supposed strategy of woman-kind in fascination, courtship, and marriage—the whole teeming with ideas bright as mirrors and just as unsubstantial, yet forming a brilliant argument to justify the ways of girls to men. The pervading characteristic of the mass was the means of forcing into notice, by strangeness of contrast, the single mournful poem that the book contained. It was placed at the very end, and under the title of 'Cancelled Words,' formed a whimsical and rather affecting love-lament, somewhat in the tone of many of Sir Thomas Wyatt's poems. This was the piece which had arrested Christopher's attention, and had been pointed out by him to his sister Faith.

'It is very touching,' she said, looking up.

'What do you think I suspect about it—that the poem is addressed to me! Do you remember, when father was alive and we were at Scarborough that season, about a governess who came there with a Sir

Ralph Petherwin and his wife, people with a sickly little daughter and a grown-up son?’

‘I never saw any of them. I think I remember your knowing something about a young man of that name.’

‘Yes, that was the family. Well, the governess there was a very attractive woman, and somehow or other I got more interested in her than I ought to have done (this is necessary to the history), and we used to meet in romantic places—and—and that kind of thing, you know. The end of it was, she jilted me and married the son.’

‘You were anxious to get away from Scarborough.’

‘Was I? Then that was chiefly the reason. Well, I decided to think no more of her, and I was helped to do it by the troubles that came upon us shortly afterwards; it is a blessed arrangement that one does not feel a sentimental grief at all when additional grief comes in the shape of practical misfortune. However, on the first afternoon of the little holiday I took for my walking tour last summer, I came to Anglebury and stayed about the neighbourhood for a day or two to see what it was like, thinking we might settle there if this place failed us. The next evening I left, and walked across the heath to Stonford—that’s a village about five miles further on—so as to be that distance on my way for next morning; and while I was crossing the heath there I met this very woman. We talked a little,

because we couldn't help it—you may imagine the kind of talk it was—and parted as coolly as we had met. Now this strange book comes to me; and I have a strong conviction that she is the writer of it, for that poem sketches a similar scene—or rather suggests it; and the tone generally seems the kind of thing she would write—not that she was a sad woman, either.'

'She seems to be a warm-hearted, impulsive woman, to judge from these tender verses.'

'People who print very warm words have sometimes very cold manners. I wonder if it is really her writing, and if she has sent it to me!'

'Would it not be a singular thing for a married woman to do? Though of course'—(she removed her spectacles as if they hindered her from thinking, and hid them under the time-piece till she should go on reading)—'of course poets have morals and manners of their own, and custom is no argument with them. I am sure I would not have sent it to a man for the world!'

'I do not see any absolute harm in her sending it. Perhaps she thinks that, since it is all over, we may as well die friends.'

'If I were her husband I should have doubts about the dying. And "all over" may not be so plain to other people as it is to you.'

'Perhaps not. And when a man checks all a woman's finer sentiment towards him by marrying her,

it is only natural that it should find a vent somewhere. However, she probably does not know of my downfall since father's death. I hardly think she would have cared to do it had she known that. (I am assuming that it is Ethelberta—Mrs. Petherwin—who sends it: of course I am not sure.) We must remember that when I knew her I was a gentleman at ease, who had not the least notion that I should have to work for a living, and not only so, but should have first to invent a profession to work at out of my old tastes.'

'Kit, you have made two mistakes in your thoughts of that lady. Even though I don't know her, I can show you that. Now I'll tell you: the first is in thinking that a married lady would send the book with that poem in it without at any rate a slight doubt as to its propriety: the second is in supposing that, had she wished to do it, she would have given the thing up because of our misfortunes. With a true woman the second reason would have had no effect had she once got over the first. I'm a woman, and that's why I know.'

Christopher said nothing, and turned over the poems.

He lived by teaching music, and, in comparison with starving, thrived; though the wealthy might possibly have said that in comparison with thriving he starved. During this night he hummed airs in bed, thought he would do for the ballad of the fair poetess

what other musicians had done for the ballads of other fair poetesses, and dreamed that she smiled on him as her prototype Sappho smiled on Phaon.

The next morning before starting on his rounds a new circumstance induced him to direct his steps to the bookseller's, and ask a question. He had found on examining the wrapper of the volume that it was posted in his own town.

'No copy of the book has been sold by me,' the bookseller's voice replied from far up the Alpine height of the shop-ladder, where he stood dusting stale volumes, as was his habit of a morning before customers came. 'I have never heard of it—probably never shall;' and he shook out the duster, so as to hit the delicate mean between stifling Christopher and not stifling him.

'Surely you don't live by your shop?' said Christopher, drawing back.

The bookseller's eyes rested on the speaker's; his face changed; he came down and placed his hand on the lappel of Christopher's coat. 'Sir,' he said, 'country bookselling is a miserable, impoverishing, exasperating thing in these days. Can you understand the rest?'

'I can; I forgive a starving man anything,' said Christopher.

'You go a long way very suddenly,' said the bookseller. 'Half as much pity would have seemed better. However, wait a moment.' He looked into a list of

new books, and added : ‘ The work you allude to was only published last week ; though, mind you, if it had been published last century I might not have sold a copy.’

Although his time was precious, Christopher had now become so interested in the circumstance that the unseen sender was somebody breathing his own atmosphere, possibly the very writer herself—the book being too new to be known—that he again passed through the blue shadow of the spire which stretched across the street to-day, and went towards the post-office, animated by a bright intention—to ask the postmaster if he knew the handwriting in which the packet was addressed.

Now the postmaster was an acquaintance of Christopher’s, but, as regarded putting that question to him, there was a difficulty. Everything turned upon whether the postmaster at the moment of asking would be in his under-government manner, or in the manner with which mere nature had endowed him.. In the latter case his reply would be all that could be wished ; in the former, a man who had sunk in society might as well put his tongue into a mousetrap as make an enquiry so obviously outside the pale of legality as was this.

So he postponed his business for the present, and refrained from entering till he passed by after dinner, when pleasant malt liquor, of that capacity for cheering

which is expressed by four large letter X's marching in a row, had refilled the globular trunk of the postmaster and neutralised some of the effects of officialty. The time was well chosen, but the enquiry threatened to prove fruitless: the postmaster had never, to his knowledge, seen the writing before. Christopher was turning away when a clerk in the background looked up and stated that some young lady had brought a packet with such an address upon it into the office two days earlier to get it stamped.

‘Do you know her?’ said Christopher.

The clerk had not been there long, and he answered the question: ‘I have seen her about the neighbourhood. She goes by every morning; I think she comes into the town from beyond the common, and returns again between four and five in the afternoon.’

‘What does she wear?’

‘A white wool jacket with zigzags of black braid.’

Christopher left the post-office and went his way. He hardly seemed inclined to push his enquiries with much vigour till after a discussion in the evening with Faith, in which she entirely agreed with him in thinking that neither author nor sender, whether different persons or one and the same, was likely to be Ethelberta. This, by a feeling of opposition, led him to resolve that he would at any rate just cast eyes upon the stranger. Among his other pupils there were two who lived at some distance from Sandbourne—one of them in the

direction indicated as that habitually taken by the young person; and in the afternoon, as he returned homeward, Christopher loitered and looked around. At first he could see nobody; but when about a mile from the outskirts of the town he discerned a light spot ahead of him, which actually turned out to be the jacket alluded to. In due time he met the wearer face to face; she was not Ethelberta Petherwin—quite a different sort of individual. He had long made up his mind that this would be the case, yet he was in some indescribable way disappointed.

Of the two classes into which gentle young women naturally divide, those who grow red at their weddings, and those who grow pale, the present one belonged to the former class. She was an April-natured, pink-cheeked girl, with eyes that would have made any jeweller in England think of his trade—one who evidently took her day in the daytime, frequently caught the early worm, and had little to do with yawns or candlelight. She came and passed him; he fancied that her countenance changed. But one may fancy anything, and the pair receded each from each without turning their heads. He could not speak to her, plain and simple as she seemed.

It is rarely that a man who can be entered and made to throb by the channel of his ears is not open to a similar attack through the channel of his eyes—for many doors will admit to one mansion—allow-

ance being made for the readier capacity of chosen and practised organs. Hence the beauties, concords, and eloquences of the female form were never without their effect upon Christopher, a born musician, artist, poet, seer, mouthpiece—whichever a translator of Nature's oracles into simple speech may be called. The young girl who had gone by was fresh and pleasant; moreover, she was a sort of mysterious link between himself and the past, which these things were vividly reviving in him. He had for some time intended to fix his lessons out of town at a somewhat later hour than hitherto, and he now found that this alteration might lead to a meeting with her every lesson-day, when perhaps, if he wished, an opportunity might occur of making her acquaintance. The contemplated change of time was carried out the following week, and at once Christopher met her again. She had not much dignity, he had not much reserve, and the sudden resolution to have a holiday which sometimes impels a plump heart to rise up against a brain that overweights it was not to be resisted. He just lifted his hat, and put the only question he could think of as a beginning: 'Have I the pleasure of addressing the author of a book of very melodious poems that was sent me the other day?'

The girl's forefinger twirled rapidly the loop of braid that it had previously been twirling slowly, and drawing in her breath she said, 'No, sir.'

‘The sender, then?’

‘Yes.’

She somehow presented herself as so insignificant by the combined effect of the manner and the words that Christopher lowered his method of address to her level at once. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘such an atmosphere as the writer of “Metres by Me” seems to breathe would soon spoil cheeks that are fresh and round as lady-apples—eh, little girl? But are you disposed to tell me that writer’s name?’

By applying a general idea to a particular case a person with the best of intentions may find himself immediately landed in a quandary. In saying to the country girl before him what would have suited the mass of country lasses well enough, Christopher had offended her beyond the cure of compliment. The expression about lady-apples and little girl was not the kind of thing she cared for.

‘I am not disposed to tell the writer’s name,’ she replied, with a dudgeon that was very great for one whose whole stock of it was a trifle. And she passed on and left him standing alone.

Thus further conversation was checked; but perhaps that very flaw in his proceedings for approaching her was what led Christopher to adhere to the rearranged hours of his lesson; he met her the next Wednesday, and the next Friday, and throughout the following week—no further words passing between

them. For a while she went by very demurely, apparently mindful of his offence. But effrontery is not proved to be part of a man's nature till he has been guilty of a second act: the best of men may commit a first through accident or ignorance—may even be betrayed into it by over-zeal for experiment. Some such conclusion may or may not have been arrived at by the girl with the lady-apple cheeks; at any rate, after the lapse of another week a new spectacle presented itself; her redness deepened whenever Christopher passed her by, and embarrassment pervaded her from the lowest stitch to the tip of her feather. She had little chance of escaping him by diverging from the road, for a figure could be seen across the open ground to the distance of half a mile on either side. One day as he drew near as usual, she met him as women meet a cloud of dust—she turned and looked backwards till he had passed.

This would have been disconcerting but for one reason: Christopher was ceasing to notice her. He was a man who often, when walking abroad, and looking as it were at the scene before his eyes, discerned successes and failures, friends and relations, episodes of childhood, wedding feasts and funerals, the landscape suffering greatly by these visions, until it became no more than the patterned wall-tints about the paintings in a gallery; something necessary to the tone and mode, yet not regarded. Nothing but a special con-

centration of himself on externals could interrupt this habit, and now that her appearance along the way had changed from a chance to a custom he began to lapse again into the old trick. He gazed once or twice at her form without seeing it: she met him the next afternoon with a parasol over her face, completely screening it from observation. He did not notice that the parasol trembled.

The womanly device of the parasol had prevailed but a few days, when a boy who tended the cows browsing in scores about the meadows asked Christopher the time of day, and afterwards stood regarding him with an arrangement of face in which the eyes dwindled very narrow, and gave up their place as the most noticeable features of the countenance to the upper and lower rows of teeth.

‘Well, what makes you merry?’ said Christopher.

‘Hee-hee-hee, Sir!—that young woman you meets with the little umbrella!’

‘What about her?’ Christopher sharply asked.

‘Why, Sir, she’ve got a little small hole in her umbrella, and when you think she don’t see ye a morsel, she’s eyeing ye all the time through the little small hole!’

Christopher went on thinking how oddly he had got mixed up with this insignificant woman. Discretion required more than ever that he should act as if there were no such being within his horizon. And as he

could not conveniently alter the time of his return home, he made it a point to read, with painful intentness, from some book every day in his walk, for it taxed his dignity of gaze a little to meet a woman who was reduced to the condition of timorously watching him like a mouse in a hole—childish as the trick was. Thus book in hand he regularly approached her now, and could discern whenever he chose, over the margin of the page which he was supposed to be concentrated upon, the hem of her garment, or the tip of her toe slipping past; but he never looked up from his book while the moor contained her. This went on till six weeks had passed from the time of their first encounter. Latterly might have been once or twice heard, when he had moved out of earshot, a sound like a small gasping sigh; but no arrangements were disturbed, and Christopher continued to keep down his eyes as persistently as a saint in a church window.

The last day of his engagement had arrived, and with it the last of his walks that way. On his final return he carried in his hand a bunch of flowers which had been presented to him at the country-house where his lessons were given. He was taking them home to his sister Faith, who prized the lingering blossoms of the seeding season. Soon appeared as usual his fellow-traveller; whereupon Christopher looked down upon his nosegay. ‘Sweet simple girl,’ he thought, ‘I’ll

endeavour to make peace with her by means of these flowers before we part for good.'

When she came up he held them out to her and said, 'Will you allow me to present you with these?'

The bright colours of the nosegay instantly attracted the girl's hand—perhaps before there had been time for thought to thoroughly construe the position; for it happened that when her arm was stretched into the air she steadied it quickly, and stood with the pose of a statue—rigid with uncertainty. But it was too late to refuse: Christopher had put the nosegay within her fingers. Whatever pleasant expression of thanks may have appeared in her eyes fell only on the bunch of flowers, for during the whole transaction they reached to no higher level than that. To say that he was coming no more seemed scarcely necessary under the circumstances, and wishing her 'Good afternoon' very heartily he passed on.

He had learnt by this time her occupation, which was that of pupil-teacher at one of the schools in the town, whither she walked daily from a village near. If he had not been poor and the little teacher humble, Christopher might possibly have been tempted to enquire more briskly about her, and who knows how such a pursuit might have ended? But hard externals rule volatile sentiment, and under these untoward

influences the girl and the book and the truth about its author were matters upon which he could not afford to expend much time. All Christopher did was to think now and then of the pretty innocent face and round deep eyes, not once wondering if the mind which enlivened them ever thought of him.

CHAPTER III.

SANDBOURNE MOOR—(*continued*).

It was one of those hostile days of the year when chatterbox ladies remain miserably in their homes to save the carriage and harness, when clerks' wives hate living in lodgings, when vehicles and people appear in the street with duplicates of themselves underfoot, when bricklayers, slaters, and other out-door journeymen sit in a shed and drink beer, when ducks and drakes play with hilarious delight at their own family game, or spread out one wing after another in the slower enjoyment of letting the delicious moisture penetrate to their innermost down. The smoke from the flues of Sandbourne had barely strength enough to emerge into the drizzling rain, hanging down the sides of each chimney-pot like the streamer of a becalmed ship; and a troop of mice might have rattled down the pipes from roof to basement with less noise than did the water that day.

On the broad moor to landward of the town, where Christopher's meetings with the teacher had so regularly occurred, were a stream and some large

pools; and beside one of these, near some hatches and a weir, stood a little square building, not much larger inside than the Lord Mayor's coach. It was known simply as 'The Weir House.' On this wet afternoon, which was the one following the day of Christopher's last lesson over the plain, a nearly invisible smoke came from the puny chimney of the hut. Though the door was closed, sounds of chatting and mirth fizzed from the interior, and would have told anybody who had come near—which nobody did—that the usually empty shell was tenanted to-day.

The scene within was a large fire in a fireplace to which the whole floor of the house was no more than a hearthstone. The occupants were two gentlemanly persons, in shooting costume, who had been traversing the moor for miles in search of wild duck and teal, a waterman, and a small spaniel. In the corner stood their guns, and two or three wild mallards, which represented the scanty product of their morning's labour, the iridescent necks of the dead birds replying to every flicker of the fire. The two sportsmen were smoking, and their man was mostly occupying himself in poking and stirring the fire with a stick: all three appeared to be pretty well wetted.

One of the gentlemen, by way of varying the not very exhilarating study of four brick walls within microscopic distance of his eye, turned to the small square hole which admitted light and air to the hut, and

looked out upon the dreary prospect before him. The wide concave of cloud, of the monotonous hue of dull pewter, formed an unbroken hood over the level from horizon to horizon; beneath it, reflecting its wan lustre, the glazed high-road which bisected the moor stretched, hedgeless and ditchless, past a directing-post where another road joined it, and on to the less regular ground beyond, lying like a riband unrolled across the scene, till it vanished over the furthestmost undulation. Beside the pools were occasional tall sheaves of flags and sedge, and about the plain a few bushes, these forming only obstructions near at hand to a view otherwise unbroken.

The sportsman's attention was attracted by a figure in a state of gradual enlargement as it approached along the road.

‘I should think that if pleasure can't tempt a native out of doors to-day, business will never force him out,’ he observed. ‘There is, for the first time, somebody coming along the road.’

‘If business don't drag him out pleasure'll never tempt en, is more like our nater in these parts, sir,’ said the man, who was looking into the fire.

The conversation showed no vitality, and down it dropped dead as before, the man who was standing up continuing to gaze into the moisture. What had at first appeared as an epicene shape the decreasing space resolved into a cloaked female under an umbrella: she

now relaxed her pace, till, reaching the directing-post where the road branched into two, she paused and looked about her. Instead of coming further she slowly retraced her steps for about a hundred yards, and partially hid herself among some stunted thorns.

‘That’s an appointment,’ said the first speaker, as he removed the cigar from his lips; ‘and by the lords, what a day and place for an appointment with a woman!’

‘What’s an appointment?’ enquired his friend, a town young man, with a Tussaud complexion and well-pencilled brows half way up his forehead, so that his upper eyelids appeared to possess the uncommon quality of tallness.

‘Look out here, and you’ll see. By that directing-post, where the two roads meet. As a man devoted to art, Ladywell, who has had the honour of being hung higher up on the Academy walls than any other living painter, you should take out your sketch-book and dash off the scene.’

Where nothing particular is going on, one incident makes a drama; and, interested in that proportion, the art-sportsman puts up his eyeglass (a form he adhered to before firing at game that had risen, by which merciful arrangement the bird got safe off), placed his face beside his companion’s, and also peered through the opening. The young pupil-teacher—for she was the object of their scrutiny—re-approached the spot

whereon she had been accustomed for the last many weeks of her journey home to meet Christopher, now for the first time missing, and again she seemed reluctant to pass the hand-post, for that marked the point where the chance of seeing him ended. She glided backwards as before, this time keeping her face still to the front, as if trying to persuade the world at large, and her own shamefacedness, that she had not yet approached the place at all.

‘Query, how long will she wait for him (for it is a him to a certainty)?’ resumed the elder of the smokers, at the end of several minutes of silence, when, full of vacillation and doubt, she became lost to view behind some bushes. ‘Will she reappear? tell me, gentles.’ The smoking went on, and up she came into open ground as before, and walked lingeringly by.

‘I wonder who the girl is, to come to such a place as that in this weather? There she is again,’ said the young man called Ladywell.

‘Some cottage lass, not yet old enough to make the most of the value set on her by her follower, small as that appears to be. Now we may get an idea of the hour named by the fellow for the appointment, for, depend upon it, the time when she first came—about five minutes ago—was the time he should have been there. It is now getting on towards five—half-past four was doubtless the time mentioned.’

‘She’s not come o’ purpose: ’tis her way home from school every day,’ said the waterman.

‘An experiment on woman’s endurance and patience under neglect. Two to one against her staying a quarter of an hour.’

‘The same odds against her not staying till five would be nearer probability. What’s half an hour to a girl in love?’

‘On a moorland in wet weather it is thirty perceptible minutes to any fireside man, woman, or beast in Christendom—minutes that can be felt, like the Egyptian plague of darkness. Now, little girl, go home: he is not worth it.’

Twenty minutes passed, and the girl returned miserably to the hand-post, still to wander back to her retreat behind the sedge, and lead any chance comer from the opposite quarter to believe that she had not yet reached this ultimate point beyond which a meeting with Christopher was impossible.

‘Now you’ll find that she means to wait the complete half-hour, and then off she goes with a broken heart.’

All three now looked through the hole to test the truth of the prognostication. The hour of five completed itself on their watches; the girl again came forward. And then the three in ambuscade could see her pull out her handkerchief, and place it to her eyes.

‘She’s grieving now because he has not come. Poor little woman, what a brute he must be; for a broken heart in a woman means a broken vow in a man, as I infer from a thousand instances in experience, romance, and history. Don’t open the door till she is gone, Ladywell; it will only disturb her.’

As they had guessed, the pupil-teacher, hearing the distant town-clock strike the hour, gave way to her fancy no longer, and launched into the diverging path. This lingering for Christopher’s arrival had, as is known, been founded on nothing more of the nature of an assignation than lay in his regular walk along the plain at that time every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of the six previous weeks. It must be said that he was very far indeed from divining that his injudicious peace-offering of the flowers had stirred into life such a wearing, anxious, hopeful, despairing solicitude as this, which had been latent for some time during his constant meetings with the little stranger.

She vanished in the mist towards the left, and the loiterers in the hut began to move and open the door, remarking, ‘Now then for Wyndway House, a change of clothes, and a dinner.’

CHAPTER IV.

SANDBOURNE PIER—ROAD TO WYNDWAY—BALL-ROOM IN
WYNDWAY HOUSE.

THE last light of a winter day had gone down behind the houses of Sandbourne, and night was shut close over all. Christopher, about eight o'clock, was standing at the end of the pier with his back towards the open sea, from whence the waves were pushing to the shore in frills and coils that were just rendered visible in all their bleak instability by the row of lights along the sides of the jetty, the rapid motion landward of the wave-tips producing upon his eye an apparent progress of the pier out to sea. Before him extended the lamp-lit watering-place itself, the specks of flame with which it was tricked out enlarging in long perspective from points far right and left to a throng in the centre of the picture, like two opposing rockets with their sparks transfixed. This pier-head was a spot which Christopher enjoyed visiting on such moaning and sighing nights as the present, when the sportive and variegated throng that haunted the pier on autumn days was no longer there, and he seemed alone with weather and the invincible sea.

Somebody came towards him along the deserted footway, and rays from the nearest lamp streaked the face of his sister Faith.

‘Oh, Christopher, I knew you were here,’ she said eagerly. ‘You are wanted; there’s a servant come from Wyndway House for you. He is sent to ask if you can come immediately to play at a little dance they have resolved upon this evening—quite suddenly it seems. If you can come, you must bring with you any assistant you can lay your hands upon at a moment’s notice, he says.’

‘Wyndway House; why on earth should the people send for me above all other musicians in the town?’

Faith did not know. ‘If you really decide to go,’ she said, as they walked homeward, ‘you might take me as your assistant. I should answer the purpose, should I not, Kit? since it is only a dance or two they seem to want.’

‘And your harp I suppose you mean. Yes; you might be competent to take a part. It cannot be a regular ball; they would have had the quadrille band for anything of that sort. Faith—we’ll go. However, let us see the man first, and enquire particulars.’

Reaching home, Christopher found at his door a horse and waggonette in charge of a man-servant in livery, who repeated what Faith had told her brother. Wyndway House was a well-known country seat three or four miles out of the town, and the coachman mentioned

that if they were going it would be well that they should get ready to start as soon as they conveniently could, since he had been told to return by ten if possible. Christopher quickly prepared himself and put a new string or two into Faith's harp, by which time she also was dressed; and, wrapping up herself and her instrument safe from the night air, away they drove at half-past nine.

'Is it a large party?' said Christopher, as they whizzed along.

'No, sir; it is what we call a dance—that is, 'tis like a ball, you know, on a small scale—a ball on a spurt, that you never thought of till you had it. In short, it grew out of a talk at dinner, I believe; and some of the young people present wanted a jig, and didn't care to play themselves, you know, young ladies being an idle class of society at the best of times. We've a house full of sleeping company, you understand—been there a week some of 'em—most of 'em being mistress's relations.'

'They probably found it a little dull.'

'Well, yes—it is rather dull for 'em—Christmas time and all. As soon as it was proposed they were wild for sending post-haste for somebody or other to play to them.'

'Did they name me particularly?' said Christopher.

'Yes; "Mr. Christopher Julian," she says. "The gent who's turned music-man?" I said. "Yes, that's him," says she.'

‘There were music-men living nearer to your end of the town than I.’

‘Yes, but I know it was you particular: though I don’t think mistress thought anything about you at first. Mr. Joyce—that’s the butler—said that your name was mentioned to our old party, when he was in the room, by a young lady staying with us, and mistress says then, “The Julians have had a downfall, and the son has taken to music.” Then when dancing was talked of, they said, “Oh let’s have him by all means.”’

‘Was the young lady who first enquired for my family the same one who said, “Let’s have him by all means”?’

‘Oh no; but it was on account of her asking that the rest said they would like you to play—at least that’s as I had it from Joyce.’

‘Do you know that lady’s name?’

‘Mrs. Petherwin.’

‘Ah!’

‘Cold, sir?’

‘Oh no.’

‘Bad corn, perhaps?—they shoot terribly at change of weather.’

‘They do.’

Christopher did not like to question the man any further, though what he had heard added new life to his previous curiosity; and they drove along the way in silence, Faith’s figure, wrapped up to the top of her

head, cutting into the sky behind them like a sugar-loaf, and the summit of the harp, wrapped up in the same way, like another. Such gates as crossed the roads had been left open by the forethought of the coachman, and, passing the lodge, they proceeded about half a mile along a private drive, then ascended a rise, and came in view of the front of the mansion, punctured with windows that were now mostly lighted up.

‘What is that?’ said Faith, catching a glimpse of something that the carriage-lamp showed on the face of one wall as they passed, a marble bas-relief of some battle-piece, built into the stonework.

‘That’s the scene of the death of one of the squire’s forefathers—Colonel Sir Martin Jones, who was killed at the moment of victory in the battle of Salamanca—but I haven’t been here long enough to know the rights of it. When I am in one of my meditations, as I wait here with the carriage sometimes, I think how many more get killed at the moment of victory than at the moment of defeat—’tis one of the contradictions of nature. This is the entrance for you, sir.’ And he turned the corner and pulled up before a side door.

They alighted and went in, Christopher shouldering Faith’s harp, and she marching modestly behind, with curly-eared music-books under her arm. They were shown into the house-steward’s room, and ushered thence along a badly-lit passage and past a door within

which a hum and laughter were audible. The door next to this was then opened for them, and they entered.

Scarcely had Faith, or Christopher either, ever beheld a more shining scene than was presented by the saloon in which they now found themselves. Coming direct from the gloomy park, and led to the room by that back passage from the servants' quarter, the light from the chandelier and branches against the walls, striking on gilding at all points, quite dazzled their sight for a minute or two; it caused Faith to move forward with her eyes on the floor, and filled Christopher with an impulse to turn back again into some dusky corner where every thread of his not over-new dress suit—rather moth-eaten through lack of feasts for airing it at—could not be counted so easily.

He was soon seated before a grand piano, and Faith sat down under the shadow of her harp, both being arranged on a dais within an alcove at one end of the room. A screen of ivy and holly had been constructed across the front of this recess for the games of the children on Christmas Eve, and it still remained there, a small creep-hole being left for entrance and exit.

Then the merry guests tumbled through doors at the further end, and dancing began. The mingling of black-coated men and bright ladies gave a charming appearance to the groups as seen by Faith and her

brother, the whole spectacle deriving an unexpected novelty from the accident of reaching their eyes through interstices in the tracery of green leaves, which added to the picture a softness that it would not otherwise have possessed. On the other hand, the musicians, having a much weaker light, could hardly be discerned by the performers in the dance.

The music was now rattling on, and the ladies in their foam-like dresses were busily threading and spinning about the floor, when Faith, casually looking up into her brother's face, was surprised to see that a change had come over it. At the end of the quadrille he leant across to her before she had time to speak, and said quietly, 'She's here!'

'Who?' said Faith, for she had not heard the words of the coachman.

'Ethelberta.'

'Then it was she who wrote the book?'

'It seems that it must have been.'

'Which is she?' asked Faith, peeping through with the keenest interest.

'The one who has the skirts of her dress looped up with convolvulus flowers—the one with her hair fastened in a sort of Venus knot behind; she has just been dancing with that perfumed piece of a man they call Mr. Ladywell—it is he with the high eyebrows arched like a girl's.' He added, with a wrinkled smile, 'I cannot for my life see anybody answering to the character

of husband to her, for every man takes notice of her.'

They were interrupted by another dance being called for, and then, his fingers tapping about upon the keys as mechanically as fowls pecking at barleycorns, Christopher gave himself up with a curious and far from unalloyed pleasure to the occupation of watching Ethelberta, now again crossing the field of his vision like a returned comet whose characteristics were fast becoming purely historical. She was a plump-armed creature, with a white round neck as firm as a fort—altogether a vigorous shape, as refreshing to the eye as the green leaves through which he beheld her. She danced freely, and with a zest that was apparently irrespective of partners. He had been waiting long to hear her speak, and when at length her voice did reach his ears, it was the revelation of a strange matter to find how great a thing that small event had become to him. He knew the old utterance—rapid but not frequent, an obstructive thought causing sometimes a sudden halt in the midst of a stream of words. But the features by which a cool observer would have singled her out from others in his memory when asking himself what she was like was a peculiar gaze into imaginary far-away distance when making a quiet remark to a partner—not with contracted eyes like a seafaring man, but with an open full look—a remark in which little words in a

low tone were made to express a great deal, as several single gentlemen afterwards found.

The production of dance-music when the criticising stage among the dancers has passed, and they have grown full of excitement and animal spirits, does not require much concentration of thought in the producers thereof; and desultory conversation accordingly went on between Faith and her brother from time to time.

‘Kit,’ she said on one occasion, ‘are you looking at the way in which the flowers are fastened to the leaves?—taking a mean advantage of being at the back of the tapestry? You cannot think how you stare at them.’

‘I was looking through them—certainly not at them. Faith, I have a feeling of being moved about like a puppet in the hands of a person who legally can be nothing to me; and I cannot make up my mind whether I like it or not.’

‘Your mover being that charming woman with the shining bunch of hair and convolvuluses?’

‘Yes: it is through her that we are brought here, and through her writing that poem, “Cancelled Words,” that the book was sent me, and through the accidental renewal of acquaintance between us on Anglebury Heath, that she wrote the poem. I was, however, at the moment you spoke, thinking more particularly of the little teacher whom Ethelberta must have commissioned to send the book to me; and why that girl was chosen to do it.’

‘There may be a hundred reasons. Kit, I have never yet seen her look once this way.’

Christopher had certainly not yet received look or gesture from her; but his time came. It was while he was for a moment outside the recess, and he caught her in the act. She became slightly confused, turned aside, and entered into conversation with a neighbour.

It was only a look, and yet what a look it was! One may say of a look that it is capable of division into as many species, families, tribes, orders, and classes as the animal world itself; that it rules schools and parliaments; is the recognised medium of matrimonial language in public, of pre-matrimonial language in private, of honeymoon language in public and private both—and is but a little thing after all. Christopher saw Ethelberta Petherwin’s look—the well-known spark of light upon the well-known depths of dark—and felt something going out of him which had gone out of him once before: he could not tell what the end of it would be.

Thus continually beholding her and her companions in the giddy whirl, the night wore on with the musicians, last dances and more last dances being added, till the intentions of the old on the matter were thrice exceeded in the interests of the young. Watching the couples whirl and turn, advance and recede as gently as spirits, knot themselves like house-flies and part again, and lullabied by the faint regular beat of their footsteps to the tune, the players sank into the peculiar

mesmeric quiet which comes over impressible people who play for a great length of time in the midst of dancers ; and at last the only noises that Christopher took cognisance of were those of the exceptional kind, breaking above the general sea of sound—a casual smart rustle of silk, a laugh, a stumble, the monosyllabic talk of those who happened to linger for a moment close to the leafy screen—all coming to his ears like voices from those old times when he had mingled in similar scenes, not as servant but as guest.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE WINDOW—THE ROAD HOME.

THE dancing was over at last, and the radiant company had left the room. A long and weary night it had been for the two players, though a stimulated interest had hindered physical exhaustion in one of them for a while. With tingling fingers and aching arms they came out of the alcove into the long and deserted apartment, now pervaded by a dry haze. The lights had burnt low, and Faith and her brother were waiting by request till the waggonette was ready to take them home, a breakfast being in course of preparation for them meanwhile.

Christopher had crossed the room to relieve his cramped limbs, and now, peeping through a crevice in the window-curtains, he said suddenly, 'Who's for a transformation scene? Faith, look here!'

He touched the blind, up it flew, and a gorgeous scene presented itself to her eyes. A huge inflamed sun was breasting the horizon of a wide sheet of sea which, to her surprise and delight, the mansion over-

looked. The brilliant disc fired all the waves that lay between it and the shore at the bottom of the grounds, where the water tossed the ruddy light from one undulation to another in glare as large and clear as mirrors, incessantly altering them, destroying them, and creating them again ; while further off they multiplied, thickened, and ran into one another like struggling armies till they met the fiery source of them all.

‘ Oh, how wonderful it is ! ’ said Faith, putting her hand on Christopher’s arm. ‘ Who knew that whilst we were all shut in here with our puny illumination such an exhibition as this was going on outside ! How sorry and mean the grand and stately room looks now ! ’

Christopher turned his back upon the window, and there were the hitherto beaming candle-flames shining no more radiantly than tarnished javelin-heads, while the snow-white lengths of wax showed themselves clammy and cadaverous as the fingers of a woman who does nothing. The leaves and flowers which had appeared so very green and blooming by the artificial light were now seen to be faded and dusty. Only the gilding of the room in some degree brought itself into keeping with the splendours outside, stray darts of light seizing upon it and lengthening themselves out along fillet, quirk, arris, and moulding, till wasted away.

‘ It seems, ’ said Faith, ‘ as if all the people who

were lately so merry here had died : we ourselves look no more than ghosts.' She turned up her weary face to her brother's, which the incoming rays smote aslant, making little furrows of every pore thereon, and shady ravines of every little furrow.

'You are very tired, Faith,' he said. 'Such a heavy night's work has been almost too much for you.'

'Oh, I don't mind that,' said Faith. 'But I could not have played so long by myself.'

'We filled up one another's gaps ; and there were plenty of them towards the morning ; but, luckily, people don't notice those things when the small hours draw on.'

'What troubles me most,' said Faith, 'is not that I have worked, but that you should be so situated as to need such miserable assistance as mine. We are poor, are we not, Kit?'

'Yes, we know a little about poverty,' he replied in as cheerful a tone as could be given to the opinion by one who had been made to simmer so painfully over the fires of that affliction as had he.

While thus lingering—

In shadowy thoroughfares of thought,

Faith interrupted with, 'I believe there is one of the dancers now!—why, I should have thought they had all gone to bed and wouldn't get up again for days.' She indicated to him a figure on the lawn towards the

left, looking upon the same flashing scene as that they themselves beheld.

‘It is your own particular one,’ continued Faith.
‘Yes, I see the blue flowers under the edge of her cloak.’

‘And I see her squirrel-coloured hair,’ said Christopher.

Both stood looking at this apparition, who once, and only once, thought fit to turn her head towards the front of the house they were gazing from. Faith was one in whom the meditative somewhat overpowered the active faculties; she went on, with no abundance of love, to theorise upon this gratuitously charming woman, who, striking freakishly into her brother’s path, seemed likely to do him no good in her sisterly estimation. Ethelberta’s bright and shapely form stood before her critic now, smartened by the motes of sunlight from head to heel: what Faith would have given to see her so clearly within!

‘Without doubt she is already a lady of many experiences,’ she said dubiously.

‘And on the way to many more,’ said Christopher; ‘perhaps forming altogether a romance curiously built up, and fitted out with circumstance, crisis, and catastrophe, in the regular way—many men’s names possibly written even now as doomed to be again wrought in with it.’ The tone was just of the kind which may be

imagined of a sombre man who had been up all night piping that others might dance.

Faith parted her lips as if in consternation at possibilities. Ethelberta, having already become an influence in Christopher's system, might soon become more—an indestructible fascination—to drag him about, turn his soul inside out, harrow him, twist him, and otherwise torment him, according to the stereotyped form of such processes. 'Never!' exclaimed the youngest of old maids, quivering.

'What does that mean?'

'I hardly know what; what are poetically called shadows, lights, fancies—in fact, nothing, dear Kit.'

They were interrupted by the opening of a door. A servant entered and came up to them.

'This is for you, I believe, sir,' he said. 'Two guineas;' and he placed the money in Christopher's hand. 'Some breakfast will be ready for you in a moment if you like to have it. Would you wish it brought in here; or will you come to the steward's room?'

'Yes, we will come.' And the man then began to extinguish the lights one by one. Christopher dropped the two pounds and two shillings singly into his pocket, and looking listlessly at the footman said, 'Can you tell me the address of that lady on the lawn? Ah, she has disappeared!'

'She wore a dress with blue flowers,' said Faith.

‘And remarkable bright in her manner? Oh, that’s the young widow, Mrs.—what’s that name—I forget for the moment.’

‘Widow?’ said Christopher, the eyes of his understanding getting wonderfully clear, and Faith uttering a private ejaculation of thanks that after all no commandments were likely to be broken in this matter. ‘The lady I mean is quite a girlish sort of woman.’

‘Yes, yes, so she is—that’s the one. Coachman says she must have been born a widow, for there is not time for her ever to have been made one. However, she’s not quite such a chicken as all that. Mrs. Petherwin, that’s the party’s name.’

‘Does she live here?’

‘No, she is staying in the house visiting for a few days with her mother-in-law. They are a London family; I don’t know her address.’

‘Is she a poetess?’

‘That I cannot say. She is very clever at verses; but she don’t lean over gates to see the sun, and goes to church as regular as you or I, so I should hardly be inclined to say that she’s the complete thing. When she’s up in one of her vagaries she’ll sit with the ladies and make up pretty things out of her head as fast as sticks a-breaking. They will run off her tongue like cotton from a reel, and if she can ever be got in the mind of telling a story she will bring it out that serious and awful that it makes your flesh creep upon your bones;

if she's only got to say that she walked out of one door into another, she'll tell it so that there seems something wonderful in it. 'Tis a bother to start her, so our people say behind her back, but, once set going, the house is all alive with her. However, it will soon be dull enough; she and Lady Petherwin are off to-morrow for Rookington, where I believe they are going to stay over New Year's day.'

'Where do you say they are going?' enquired Christopher, as they followed the footman.

'Rookington Park—about three miles out of Sandbourne, in the opposite direction to this.'

'A widow,' Christopher murmured.

Faith overheard him. 'That makes no difference to us, does it?' she said wistfully.

Forty minutes later they were driving along an open road over a ridge which commanded a view of a small inlet below them, the sands of this nook being sheltered by white cliffs. Here at once they saw, in the full light of the sun, two women standing side by side, their faces directed over the sea.

'There she is again!' said Faith. 'She has walked along the shore from the lawn where we saw her before.'

'Yes,' said the coachman, 'she's a curious woman seemingly. She'll talk to any poor body she meets. You see she had been out for a morning walk instead

of going to bed, and that is some queer mortal or other she has picked up with on her way.'

'I wonder she does not prefer some rest,' Faith observed.

The road then dropped into a hollow, and the women by the sea were no longer within view from the carriage, which rapidly neared Sandbourne with the two musicians.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHORE BY WYNDWAY.

THE east gleamed upon Ethelberta's squirrel-coloured hair as she said to her companion, 'I have come, Picotee; but not, as you imagine, from a night's sleep. We have actually been dancing till daylight at Wyndway.'

'Then you should not have troubled to come! I could have borne the disappointment under such circumstances,' said the pupil-teacher, who, wearing a dress not so familiar to Christopher's eyes as had been the little white jacket, had not been recognised by him from the hill. 'You look so tired, Berta. I could not stay up all night for the world!'

'One gets used to these things,' said Ethelberta, quietly. 'I should have been in bed certainly, had I not particularly wished to use this opportunity of meeting you before you go home to-morrow. I could not have come to Sandbourne to-day, because we are leaving to return again to Rookington. This is all that I wish you to take to mother—only a few little things which may be useful to her; but you will see what it contains

when you open it.' She handed to Picotee a small parcel. 'This is for yourself,' she went on, giving a small packet besides. 'It will pay your fare home and back, and leave you something to spare.'

'Thank you,' said Picotee, docilely.

'Now, Picotee,' continued the elder, 'let us talk for a few minutes before I go back: we may not meet again for some time.' She put her arm round the waist of Picotee, who did the same by Ethelberta; and thus interlaced they walked backwards and forwards upon the firm flat sand with the motion of one body animated by one will.

'Well, what did you think of my poems?'

'I liked them; but naturally, I did not understand all the experience you describe. It is so different from mine. Yet that made them more interesting to me. I thought I should so much like to mix in the same scenes; but that of course is impossible.'

'I am afraid it is. And you posted the book as I said?'

'Yes.' She added hurriedly, as if to change the subject, 'I have told nobody that we are sisters, or that you are known in any way to me or to mother or to any of us. I thought that would be best, from what you said.'

'Yes, perhaps it is best for the present.'

'The box of clothes came safely, and I find very little alteration will be necessary to make the dress do



“WELL, WHAT DID YOU THINK OF MY POEMS?”

beautifully for me on Sundays. It is quite new-fashioned to me, though I suppose it was old-fashioned to you. Oh, and Berta, will the title of Lady Petherwin descend to you when your mother-in-law dies?’

‘No, of course not. She is only a knight’s widow, and that’s nothing.’

‘The lady of a knight looks as good on paper as the lady of a lord.’

‘Yes. And in other places too sometimes. However, about your journey home. Be very careful; and don’t make any enquiries at the stations of anybody but officials. If any man wants to be friendly with you, try to find out if it is from a genuine wish to assist you, or from admiration of your fresh face.’

‘How shall I know which?’ said Picotee.

Ethelberta laughed. ‘If Heaven does not tell you at the moment I cannot,’ she said. ‘But humanity looks with a different eye from love, and upon the whole it is most to be prized by all of us. I believe it ends oftener in marriage than do a lover’s flying smiles. So that for this and other reasons love from a stranger is as worthless as a speculation as it is dangerous as a game. Well, Picotee, has anyone paid you real attentions yet?’

‘No—that is——’

‘There is something going on.’

‘Only a wee bit.’

‘I thought so. There was a dishonesty about your

dear eyes which has never been there before, and love-making and dishonesty are inseparable as coupled hounds. Up comes man, and away goes innocence. Are you going to tell me anything about him?'

'I would rather not, Ethelberta; because it is hardly anything.'

'Well, be careful. And mind this, never tell him what you feel.'

'But then he will never know it.'

'Nor must he. He must think it only. The difference between his thinking and knowing is often the difference between your winning and losing. But general advice is not of much use, and I cannot give more unless you tell more. What is his name?'

Picotee did not reply.

'Never mind: keep your secret. However, listen to this: not a kiss—not so much as the shadow, hint, or merest seedling of a kiss!'

'There is no fear of it,' murmured Picotee; 'though not because of me!'

'You see, my dear Picotee, a lover is not a relative; nor is he quite a stranger; but he may end in being either, and the way to reduce him to whichever of the two you wish him to be is to treat him like the other. Men who come courting are like bad cooks; if you are kind to them, instead of ascribing it to an exceptional courtesy on your part, they instantly set it down to a marvellous worth on theirs.'

‘But I ought to favour him just a little, poor thing? Just the smallest glimmer of a gleam!’

‘Only a very little indeed—so that your words come as a relief to his misery, not as additions to his happiness.’

‘It is being too clever, all this; and we ought to be harmless as doves.’

‘Ah, Picotee! to continue harmless as a dove you must be wise as a serpent, you’ll find—ay, ten serpents, for that matter.’

‘But if I cannot get at him, how can I manage him in these ways you speak of?’

‘Get at him? I suppose he gets at you in some way, does he not?—tries to see you, or to be near you?’

‘No—that’s just the point—he doesn’t do any such thing, and there’s the worry of it!’

‘Well, what a silly girl! Then he is not your lover at all?’

‘Perhaps he’s not. But I am his, at any rate—twice over.’

‘That’s no use. Furnish feeling for both sides? Why it’s worse than furnishing money for both. You don’t suppose a man will give his heart in exchange for a woman’s when he has already got hers for nothing? That’s not the way old Adam does business at all. If this interesting man of yours neither pities you when he is cool, blesses you when he is warm, nor curses you

when he is hot, think no more of him, for he'll never marry you.'

Picotee sighed. 'Have you got a young man, too, Berta?'

'A young man?'

'A lover I mean—that's what we call 'em down here.'

'It is difficult to explain,' said Ethelberta evasively. 'I knew one many years ago, and I have seen him again, and—that is all.'

'According to my idea you have one, but according to your own you have not; he does not love you, but you love him—is that how it is?'

'I have not quite considered how it is.'

'Do you love him?'

'I have never seen a man I hate less.'

'A great deal lies covered up there, I expect!'

'He was in that carriage which drove over the hill at the moment we met here.'

'Ah-ah—some great lord or another who has his day by candle-light, and so on. I guess the style. Somebody who no more knows how much bread is a loaf than I do the price of diamonds and pearls.'

'I am afraid he's only a commoner as yet, and not a very great one either. But surely you guess, Picotee? But I'll set you an example of frankness by telling his name. My friend, Mr. Julian, to whom you posted

the book. Such changes as he has seen!—from affluence to poverty. He and his sister have been playing dances all night at Wyndway—What is the matter?’

‘Only a pain!’

‘My dear Picotee——’

‘I think I’ll sit down for a moment, Berta.’

‘What—have you over-walked yourself, dear?’

‘Yes—and I got up very early, you see.’

‘I hope you are not going to be ill, child. You look as if you ought not to be here.’

‘Oh, it is quite trifling. Does not getting up in a hurry cause a sense of faintness sometimes?’

‘Yes, in people who are not strong.’

‘If we don’t talk about being faint it will go off. Faintness is such a queer thing that to think of it is to have it. Let us talk as we were talking before—about your young man and other indifferent matters, so as to divert my thoughts from fainting, dear Berta. I have always thought the book was to be forwarded to that gentleman because he was a connection of yours by marriage, and he had asked for it. And so you have met this—this Mr. Julian, and gone for walks with him in evenings, I suppose, just as young men and women do who are courting?’

‘No, indeed—what an absurd child you are!’ said Ethelberta. ‘I knew him once, and he is interesting; a few little things like that make it all up.’

‘The love is all on one side, as with me.’

‘Oh, no, no : there is nothing like that. I am not attached to anyone, strictly speaking—though, more strictly speaking, I am not unattached.’

‘’Tis a delightful middle mind to be in. I know it, for I was like it once ; but I had scarcely been so long enough to know where I was before I was gone past.’

‘You should have commanded yourself, or drawn back entirely ; for let me tell you that at the beginning of caring for a man—just when you are suspended between thinking and feeling—there is a hair’s breadth of time at which the question of getting into love or not getting in is a matter of will—quite a thing of choice. At the same time, drawing back is a tame dance, and the best of all is to stay balanced awhile.’

‘You do that well, I’ll warrant.’

‘Well, no ; for what between continually wanting to love, to escape the blank lives of those who do not, and wanting not to love, to keep out of the miseries of those who do, I get foolishly warm and foolishly cold by turns.’

‘Yes—and I am like you as far as the “foolishly” goes. I wish we poor girls could contrive to bring a little wisdom into our love by way of a change!’

‘That’s the very thing that leading minds in town have begun to do, but there are difficulties. It is easy to love wisely, but the rich man may not marry you ; and it is not very hard to reject wisely, but the poor

man doesn't care. Altogether it is a precious problem. But shall we clamber out upon those shining blocks of rock, and find some of the little yellow shells that are in the crevices? I have ten minutes longer, and then I must go.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE DINING-ROOM OF A TOWN HOUSE—THE
BUTLER'S PANTRY.

A FEW weeks later there was a friendly dinner-party at the house of a gentleman called Doncastle, who lived in a moderately fashionable square of west London. All the friends and relatives present were nice people, who exhibited becoming signs of pleasure and gaiety at being there; but as regards the vigour with which these emotions were expressed, it may be stated that a slight laugh from far down the throat and a slight narrowing of the eye were equivalent as indices of the degree of mirth felt to a Ha-ha-ha! and a shaking of the shoulders among the minor traders of the kingdom; and to a Ho-ho-ho! contorted features, purple face, and a stamping foot among the gentlemen in corduroy and fustian who adorn the remoter provinces.

The conversation was chiefly about a volume of musical, tender, and humorous rhapsodies lately issued to the world in the guise of verse, which had been reviewed and talked about everywhere. This topic, beginning as a private dialogue between a young

painter named Ladywell and the lady on his right hand, had enlarged its ground by degrees, as a subject will extend on those rare occasions when it happens to be one about which each person has thought something beforehand, instead of, as in the natural order of things, one to which the oblivious listener replies mechanically, with earnest features, but with thoughts far away. And so the whole table made the matter a thing to enquire or reply upon at once, and isolated rills of other chat died out like a river in the sands.

‘Witty things, and occasionally Anacreontic: and they have the originality which such a style must naturally possess when carried out by a feminine hand,’ said Ladywell.

‘If it is a feminine hand,’ said a man near.

Ladywell looked as if he sometimes knew secrets, though he did not wish to boast, and made no answer.

‘Written, I presume you mean, in the Anacreontic measure of three feet and a half—spondees and iambs?’ said a gentleman in spectacles, glancing round, and giving emphasis to his enquiry by causing bland glares of a circular shape to proceed from his glasses towards the person interrogated.

The company appeared willing to give consideration to the words of a man who knew such things as that, and hung forward to listen. But Ladywell stopped the whole current of affairs in that direction by saying—

‘O no; I was speaking rather of the matter and tone. In fact, the “Seven Days’ Review” said they were Anacreontic, you know; and so they are—anyone may feel they are.’

The general look then implied a false encouragement, and the man in spectacles looked down again, being a nervous person, who never had time to show his merits because he was so much occupied in hiding his faults.

‘Do you know the authoress, Mr. Neigh?’ continued Ladywell.

‘Can’t say that I do,’ he replied.

Neigh was a man who never disturbed the flesh upon his face except when he was obliged to do so, and paused semicolons where other people only paused commas; as he moved his chin in speaking, motes of light from under the candle-shade caught, lost, and caught again the outlying threads of his burnished beard.

‘She will be famous some day; and you ought at any rate to read her book.’

‘Yes, I ought, I know. In fact, some years ago I should have done it immediately, because I had a reason for pushing on that way just then.’

‘Ah, what was that?’

‘Well, I thought of going in for Westminster Abbey myself at that time; but a fellow has so much to do, and——’

‘What a pity that you didn’t follow it up. A man of your powers, Mr. Neigh——’

‘Afterwards I found I was too steady for it, and had too much of the respectable householder in me. Besides, so many other men are on the same tack. Jolland, and Snooks, and Brown, and Chummins, and several more I knew were all that way inclined, and gave up paying their bills, and threw away their brushes and combs, and did no end of preliminary things of that sort; and then I didn’t care about it, somehow.’

‘How is Jolland getting on?’

‘I have not heard since he shut himself up and left off mankind.’

‘I don’t understand high art, and am utterly in the dark on what are the true laws of criticism,’ a plain married lady, who wore archæological jewellery, was saying at this time. ‘But I know that I have derived an unusual amount of amusement from those verses, and I am heartily thankful to “Me” for them.’

‘I am afraid,’ said a gentleman who was suffering from a bad shirt-front, ‘that an estimate which depends upon feeling in that way is not to be trusted as permanent opinion.’

The subject now flitted to the other end.

‘Somebody has it that when the heart flies out before the understanding, it saves the judgment a world of pains,’ came from a voice in that quarter.

‘I, for my part, like something merry,’ said an elderly woman, whose face was bisected by the edge of a shadow, which toned her forehead and eyelids to a livid neutral tint, and left her cheeks and mouth like metal at a white heat in the uninterrupted light. ‘I think the liveliness of those ballads as great a recommendation as any. After all, enough misery is known to us by our experiences and those of our friends, and what we see in the newspapers, for all purposes of chastening, without having gratuitous grief inflicted upon us.’

‘But you would not have wished that “Romeo and Juliet” should have ended happily, or that Othello should have discovered the perfidy of his Ancient in time to prevent all fatal consequences?’

‘I am not afraid to go so far as that,’ said the old lady. ‘Shakespeare is not everybody, and I am sure that thousands of people who have seen those plays would have driven home more cheerfully afterwards if by some contrivance the characters could all have been joined together respectively. I uphold our anonymous author on the general ground of her levity.’

‘Well, it is an old and worn argument—that about the inexpediency of tragedy—and much may be said on both sides. It is not to be denied that the anonymous Sappho’s verses—for it seems that she is really a woman—are clever.’

‘Clever!’ said Ladywell—the young man with

the crescent eyebrows—‘they are marvellously brilliant.’

‘She is rather warm in her assumed character.’

‘That’s a sign of her actual coldness; she lets off her feeling in theoretic grooves, and there is sure to be none left for practical ones. Whatever seems to be the most prominent vice, or the most prominent virtue, in anybody’s writing is the one thing you are safest from in personal dealings with the writer.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean to call her warmth of feeling a vice or virtue exactly——’

‘I agree with you,’ said Neigh to the last speaker but one, in tones as emphatic as they possibly could be without losing their proper character of indifference to the whole matter. ‘Warm sentiment of any sort, whenever we have it, disturbs us too much to leave us repose enough for writing it down.’

‘I am sure, when I was at the ardent age,’ said the mistress of the house, in a tone of pleasantly agreeing with everyone, particularly those who were diametrically opposed to each other, ‘I could no more have printed such emotions and made them public than I—could have helped privately feeling them.’

‘I wonder if she has gone through half she says? If so, what an experience!’

‘O no—not at all likely,’ said Mr. Neigh. ‘It is as risky to calculate people’s ways of living from their writings as their incomes from their way of living.’

‘She is as true to nature as fashion is false,’ said the painter, in his warmth becoming scarcely complimentary, as sometimes happens with young persons. ‘I don’t think that she has written a word more than what every woman would deny feeling in a society where no woman says what she means or does what she says. And can any praise be greater than that?’

‘Ha-ha! Capital!’

‘All her verses seem to me,’ said a rather stupid person, ‘to be simply—

Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-la’,
 Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-lu’,
 Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-lalla,
 Tral’-la-la-lu’.

When you take away the music there is nothing left. Yet she is plainly a woman of great culture.’

‘Have you seen what the “London Light” says about them—one of the finest things I have ever read in the way of admiration?’ continued Ladywell, paying no attention to the previous speaker. He lingered for a reply, and then impulsively quoted several lines from the periodical he had named, without aid or hesitation. ‘Good, is it not?’ added Ladywell.

They assented, but in such an unqualified manner that half as much readiness would have meant more. But Ladywell, though not experienced enough to be quite free from enthusiasm, was too experienced to

mind indifference for more than a minute or two. When the ladies had withdrawn, the young man went on—

‘Colonel Staff said a funny thing to me yesterday about these very poems. He asked me if I knew her, and——’

‘Her? Why, he knows that it is a lady all the time, and we were only just now doubting whether the sex of the writer could be really what it seems. Shame, Ladywell!’ said his friend Neigh.

‘Ah, Mr. Ladywell,’ said another, ‘now we have found you out. You know her!’

‘Now—I say—ha-ha!’ continued the painter, with a face expressing that he had not at all tried to be found out as the man possessing incomparably superior knowledge of the poetess. ‘I beg pardon really, but don’t press me on the matter. Upon my word the secret is not my own. As I was saying, the Colonel said, “Do you know her?”—but you don’t care to hear?’

‘We shall be delighted!’

‘So the Colonel said, “Do you know her?” adding, in a most comic way, “Between you and *Me*, Ladywell, I believe there is a secret tie strong as death”—meaning her, you know, by *Me*. Just like the Colonel—ha-ha-ha!’

The older men did not oblige Ladywell a second time with any attempt at appreciation; but a weird

silence ensued, during which the smile upon Ladywell's face became frozen to painful permanence.

‘Meaning by *Me*, you know, the “Me” of the poems—heh-heh!’ he repeated.

‘It was a very humorous incident certainly,’ said his friend Neigh, at which there was a laugh—not from anything connected with what he said, but simply because it was the right thing to laugh when Neigh meant you to do so.

‘Now don’t, Neigh—you are too hard upon me. But, seriously, two or three fellows were there when I said it, and they all began laughing—but, then, the Colonel said it in such a queer way, you know. But you were asking me about her? Well, the fact is, between ourselves, I do know that she is a lady; and I don’t mind telling a word——’

‘But we would not for the world be the means of making you betray her confidence—would we, Jones?’

‘No, indeed; we would not.’

‘No, no; it is not that at all—this is really too bad!—you must listen just for a moment——’

‘Ladywell, don’t betray anybody on our account.’

‘Whoever the illustrious young lady may be she has seen a great deal of the world,’ said Mr. Doncastle, blandly, ‘and puts her experience of the comedy of its emotions, and of its method of showing them, in a very vivid light.’

‘I heard a man say that the novelty with which the

ideas are presented is more noticeable than the originality of the ideas themselves,' observed Neigh. 'The woman has made a great talk about herself; and I am quite weary of people asking of her condition, place of abode, has she a father, has she a mother, or dearer one yet than all other.'

'I would have burlesque quotation put down by Act of Parliament, and all who dabble in it placed with him who can cite Scripture for his purposes,' said Ladywell, in retaliation.

After a pause Neigh remarked half-privately to their host, who was his uncle: 'Your butler Chickerel is a very intelligent man, as I have heard.'

'Yes, he does very well,' said Mr. Doncastle.

'But is he not a—very extraordinary man?'

'Not to my knowledge,' said Doncastle, looking up surprised. 'Why do you think that, Alfred?'

'Well, perhaps it was not a matter to mention. He reads a great deal, I dare say?'

'I don't think so.'

'I noticed how wonderfully his face kindled when we began talking about the poems. Perhaps he is a poet himself in disguise. Did you observe it?'

'No. To the best of my belief he is a very trustworthy and honourable man. He has been with us—let me see, how long?—five months, I think, and he was fifteen years in his last place. It certainly is a new side to his character if he publicly showed any in-

terest in the conversation, whatever he might have felt.'

'Since the matter has been mentioned,' said Mr. Jones, 'I may say that I too noticed the singularity of it.'

'If you had not said otherwise,' replied Doncastle, somewhat warmly, 'I should have asserted him to be the last man-servant in London to infringe such an elementary rule. If he did so this evening, it is certainly for the first time, and I sincerely hope that no annoyance was caused——'

'O no, no—not at all—it might have been a mistake of mine,' said Jones. 'I should quite have forgotten the circumstance if Mr. Neigh's words had not brought it to my mind. It was really nothing to notice, and I beg that you will not say a word to him about it on my account.'

'He has a taste that way, my dear uncle, nothing more, depend upon it,' said Neigh. 'If I had such a man belonging to me I should only be too proud. Certainly do not mention it.'

'Of course Chickerel is Chickerel,' Mr. Doncastle rejoined. 'We all know what that means. And really, on reflecting, I do remember that he is of a literary turn of mind—not further by an inch than is commendable, you know. I am quite aware as I glance down the papers and prints any morning that Chickerel's eyes have been over the ground before mine, and that

he generally forestalls the rest of us by a chapter or so in the last new book sent home ; but in these vicious days that particular weakness is really virtue, just because it is not quite a vice.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Jones, the reflective man in spectacles, 'positive virtues are getting moved off the stage : negative ones are moved on to the place of positives ; we thank bare justice as we used only to thank generosity ; call a man honest who steals only by law, and consider him a benefactor if he does not steal at all.'

'Hear, hear!' said Neigh. 'We will decide that Chickereel is even a better trained fellow than if he had shown no interest at all in his face.'

'The action being like those trifling irregularities in art at its vigorous periods, which seemed designed to hide the unpleasant monotony of absolute symmetry,' said Ladywell.

'On the other hand, an affected want of training of that sort would be even a better disguise for an artful man than a perfectly impassible demeanour. He is two removes from discovery in a hidden scheme, whilst a neutral face is only one.'

'You quite alarm me by these spacious theories,' said Mr. Doncastle, laughing ; and the subject then became compounded with other matters, till the speakers rose to rejoin the charming flock upstairs.

In the basement story at this hour Mr. Chickereel

the butler, who had formed the subject of discussion on the floor above, was busily engaged in looking after his two subordinates as they bustled about in the operations of clearing away. He was a man of whom, if the shape of certain bones and muscles of the face is ever to be taken as a guide to the character, one might safely have predicated conscientiousness in the performance of duties, a thorough knowledge of all that appertained to them, a general desire to live on without troubling his mind about anything which did not concern him. Any person interested in the matter would have assumed without hesitation that the estimate his employer had given of Chickerel was a true one—more, that not only would the butler under all ordinary circumstances resolutely prevent his face from showing curiosity in an unbecoming way, but that, with the soul of a true gentleman, he would, if necessary, equivocate as readily as the noblest of his betters to remove any stain upon his honour in such trifles. Hence it is apparent that if Chickerel's countenance really appeared, as Neigh had asserted, full of curiosity with regard to the gossip that was going on, the feelings which led to the exhibition must have been of a very unusual and irrepressible kind.

His hair was of that peculiar bluish-white which is to be observed when the oncoming years, instead of singling out special locks of a man's head for operating against, advance uniformly over the whole field, and enfeeble

the colour at all points before absolutely extinguishing it anywhere ; his nose was of the knotty shape in the gristle and earthward tendency in the flesh which is commonly said to carry sound judgment above it, his eyes were thoughtful, and his face was thin—a contour which, if it at once abstracted from his features that cheerful assurance of singleminded honesty which adorns the exteriors of so many of his brethren, might have raised a presumption in the minds of some beholders that perhaps in this case the quality might not be altogether wanting within.

The coffee having been served to the people upstairs, one of the footmen rushed into his bedroom on the lower floor, and in a few minutes emerged again in the dress of a respectable clerk who had been born for better things, with the trifling exceptions that he wore a low-crowned hat, and instead of knocking his heels on the pavement walked with a gait as delicate as a lady's. Going out of the area-door with a cigar in his mouth, he mounted the steps hastily to keep an appointment round the corner—the keeping of which as a private gentleman necessitated the change of the greater part of his clothes twice within a quarter of an hour—the limit of his time of absence. The other footman was upstairs, and the butler, finding that he had a few minutes to himself, sat down at the table and wrote :—

‘My dear Ethelberta,—I did not intend to write to you for some few days to come, but the way in which you have been talked about here this evening makes me anxious to send a line or two at once, though I have very little time to spare, as usual. We have just had a dinner-party—indeed the carriages have not yet been brought round—and the talk at dinner was about your verses, of course. The thing was brought up by a young fellow named Ladywell—do you know him? He is a painter by profession, but he has a pretty good private income beyond what he gets by practising his line of business among the nobility, and that I expect is not little, for he is well known, and encouraged because he is young, and good-looking, and so forth. His family own a good bit of land somewhere out Norfolk way. However, I am before my story. From what they all said it is pretty clear that you are thought a great deal of in fashionable society as a poetess—but perhaps you know this as well as I—moving in it as you do yourself, my dear.

‘The ladies afterwards got very curious about your age, so curious in fact, and so full of certainty that you were thirty-five and a blighted existence, if an hour, that I felt inclined to rap out there and then, and hang what came of it: “My daughter, ladies, was to my own and her mother’s certain knowledge only twenty-one last birthday, and has as bright a heart as

anybody in London." A smart thunderbolt like that is almost worth a servant's place sometimes, considering the good it does his soul. One of them actually said that you must be fifty to have got such an experience. Her guess was a very shrewd one in the bottom of it, however, for it was grounded upon the way you use those strange experiences of mine in the society that I tell you of, and dress them up as if they were yours ; and, as you see, she hit off my own age to a year. I thought it was very sharp of her to be so right although so wrong.

'I do not want to influence your plans in any way about things which your school learning fits you to understand much better than I, who never had such opportunities, but I think that if I were in your place, Berta, I would not let my name be known just yet, for people always want what's kept from them, and don't value what's given. If penny oranges were a pound apiece all the House of Lords would sit sucking them. I am not sure, but I think that after the women had gone upstairs the others turned their thoughts upon you again ; what they said about you I don't know, for if there's one thing I hate 'tis hanging about the doors when the men begin to get moved by their wine, which they did to a large extent to-night, and spoke very loud. They always do here, for old Don is a hearty giver in his way. However, as you see these people from their own level now, it is not much

that I can tell you in seeing them only from the under side, though I see strange things sometimes, and of course—

What great ones do the less will prattle of,

as it says in that book of select pieces that you gave me.

‘ Well, my dear girl, I hope you will prosper. One thing above all others you’ll have to mind, and it is that folk must continually strain to advance in order to remain where they are : and you particularly. But as for trying too hard, I wouldn’t do it. Much lies in minding this, that your best plan for lightness of heart is to raise yourself a little higher than your old mates, but not so high as to be quite out of their reach. All human beings enjoy themselves from the outside, and so getting on *a little* has this good in it, you still keep in your old class where your feelings are, and are thoughtfully treated by this class : while by getting on *too much* you are sneered at by your new acquaintance, who don’t know the skill of your rise, and you are parted from and forgot by the old ones who do. Whatever happens, don’t be too quick to feel. You will surely get some hard blows when you are found out, for if the great can find no excuse for hitting with a mind, they’ll do it and say ’twas in fun. But you are young and healthy, and youth and health are power. I wish I could have a decent footman here

with me, but I suppose it is no use trying. It is such men as these that provoke the contempt we get. Well, thank God a few years will see the end of me, for I am growing ashamed of my company—so different as they are to the servants of old times.

‘Your affectionate father,

‘R. CHICKEREL.

‘P.S.—Do not press Lady Petherwin any further to remove the rules on which you live with her. She is quite right: she cannot keep us, and to recognise us would do you no good, nor us either. We are content to see you secretly, since it is best for you.’

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTOPHER'S LODGINGS—THE GROUNDS ABOUT
ROOKINGTON.

MEANWHILE, in the distant town of Sandbourne, Christopher Julian had recovered from the weariness produced by his labours at the Wyndway evening-party where Ethelberta had been a star. Instead of engaging his energies to clear encumbrances from the tangled way of his life, he now set about reading the popular 'Metres by Me' with more interest and assiduity than ever; for though Julian was a thinker by instinct, he was only a worker by effort; and the greater of these kinds being dependent upon the less for its exhibition, there was often a lamentable lack of evidence of his power in either. It is a provoking correlation, and has conduced to the obscurity of many a genius.

'Kit,' said his sister, on reviving at the end of the bad headache which had followed the dance, 'those poems seem to have increased in value with you. The lady, lofty as she appears to be, would be flattered if she only could know how much you study them. Have you decided to thank her for them? Now let

us talk it over—I like having a chat about such a pretty new subject.’

‘I would thank her in a moment if I were absolutely certain that she had anything to do with sending them, or even writing them. I am not quite sure of that yet.’

‘How strange that a woman could bring herself to write those verses!’

‘Not at all strange—they are natural outpourings.’

Faith looked critically at the remoter caverns of the fire.

‘Why strange?’ continued Christopher. ‘There is no harm in them.’

‘O no—no harm. But I cannot explain to you—unless you see it partly of your own accord—that to write them she must be rather a fast lady—not a bad fast lady; a nice fast lady, I mean, of course. There, I have said it now, and I daresay you are vexed with me, for your interest in her has deepened to what it originally was, I think. I don’t mean any absolute harm by “fast,” Kit.’

‘Bold, forward, you mean, I suppose?’

Faith tried to hit upon a better definition which should please all round; and, on failing to do so, looked concerned at her brother’s somewhat grieved appearance, and said, helplessly, ‘Yes, I suppose I do.’

‘My idea of her is quite the reverse. A poetess

must intrinsically be sensitive, or she could never feel : but, then, frankness is a rhetorical necessity even with the most modest, if their inspirations are to do any good in the world. You will, for certain, not be interested in something I was going to tell you, which I thought would have pleased you immensely ; but it is not worth mentioning now.'

. 'If you will not tell me, never mind. But don't be crabbed, Kit ! You know how interested I am in all your affairs.'

'It is only that I have composed an air to one of the prettiest of her songs, "When tapers tall"—but I am not sure about the power of it. This is how it begins—I threw it off in a few minutes, after you had gone to bed.'

He went to the piano and lightly touched over an air, the manuscript copy of which he placed in front of him, and listened to hear her opinion, having proved its value frequently ; for it was not that of a woman merely, but impersonally human. Though she was unknown to fame, this was a great gift in Faith, since to have an unsexed judgment is as precious as to be an unsexed being is deplorable.

'It is very fair indeed,' said the sister, scarcely moving her lips in her great attention. 'Now again, and again, and again. How could you do it in the time !'

Kit knew that she admired his performance : pas-

give assent was her usual praise, and she seldom insisted vigorously upon any view of his compositions unless for purposes of emendation.

‘I was thinking that, as I cannot very well write to her, I may as well send her this,’ said Christopher, with lightened spirits, voice to correspond, and eyes likewise; ‘there can be no objection to it, for such things are done continually. Consider while I am gone. Faith. I shall be out this evening for an hour or two.’

When Christopher left the house shortly after, instead of going into the town on some errand, as was customary whenever he went from home after dark, he ascended a back street, passed over the hills behind, and walked at a brisk pace inland along the road to Rookington Park, where, as he had learnt, Ethelberta and Lady Petherwin were staying for a time, the day or two which they spent at Wyndway having formed a short break in the middle of this visit. The moon was shining to-night, and Christopher sped onwards over the pallid high road as readily as he could have done at noonday. In three-quarters of an hour he reached the park gates; and entering now upon a tract which he had never before explored, he went along more cautiously and with some uncertainty as to the precise direction that the road would take. A frosted expanse of even grass, on which the shadow of his head appeared with an opal halo round it, soon allowed the house to be

discovered beyond, the other portions of the park abounding with timber older and finer than that of any other spot in the neighbourhood. Christopher withdrew into the shade, and wheeled round to the front of the building that contained his old love. Here he gazed and idled, as many a man has done before him—wondering which room the fair poetess occupied, waiting till lights began to appear in the upper windows—which they did as uncertainly as glow-worms blinking up at eventide—and warming with currents of revived feeling in perhaps the sweetest of all conditions. New love is brightest, and long love is greatest; but revived love is the tenderest thing known upon earth.

Occupied thus, Christopher was greatly surprised to see, on casually glancing to one side, another man standing close to the shadowy trunk of another tree, in a similar attitude to his own, gazing, with arms folded, as blankly at the windows of the house as Christopher himself had been gazing. Though nothing in his own action had appeared at all black or villanous to him, this duplicate of the act in somebody else he instantly felt to be a contemptible thing, demanding instant hatred. Not willing to be discovered, Christopher stuck closer to the tree. While he waited thus, the stranger began murmuring words, in a slow soft voice. Christopher listened till he heard the following:—

Pale was the day and rayless, love,
That had an eve so dim.

Two well-known lines from one of Ethelberta's poems.

Jealousy is a familiar kind of heat which encircles, disfigures, licks playfully, clouds, blackens, eats into, sears, and boils a man as a fire does a pot; and on recognising these pilferings from what he had grown to regard as his own treasury, Christopher's fingers began to nestle with great vigour in the palms of his hands. Three or four minutes passed when the unknown rival gave a last glance at the windows, and walked away. Christopher did not like the look of that walk at all—there was grace enough in it to suggest that his antagonist had no mean chance of finding favour in a woman's eyes. A sigh, too, seemed to proceed from the stranger's breast; but as their distance apart was too great for any such sound to be heard by any possibility, Christopher set down that to imagination, or to the brushing of the wind over the trees.

The lighted windows went out one by one, and all the house was in darkness. Mr. Julian then walked off himself, with a vigour that was spasmodic only, and with much less brightness of mind than he had experienced on his journey hither. The stranger had gone another way, and Christopher saw no more of him. When he reached Sandbourne, Faith was still sitting up.

'But I told you I was going to take a long walk,' he said.

‘No, Christopher : really you did not. How tired and sad you do look—though I always know beforehand when you are in that state : one of your feet has a drag about it as you pass along the pavement outside the window.’

‘Yes, I forgot that I did not tell you.’

He could not begin to describe his pilgrimage : it was too silly a thing even for her to hear of.

‘It does not matter at all about my staying up,’ said Faith, assuringly ; ‘that is, if exercise benefits you. Walking up and down the lane, I suppose?’

‘No ; not walking up and down the lane.’

‘The turnpike-road to Rookington is pleasant.’

‘Faith, I know you think me a simpleton : that is really where I have been. How came you to know?’

‘I only guessed. Verses and an accidental meeting produce a special journey.’

‘Ethelberta is a fine woman, physically and mentally, both. I wonder people do not talk about her twice as much as they do.’

‘Then surely you are getting attached to her again. You think you discover in her more than anybody else does ; and love begins with a sense of superior discernment.’

‘I don’t feel it.’

‘And ends with a sense of blindness.’

‘And I don’t feel that. What is it like in the middle? You may spot me there.’

‘It is not so bad as that, Christopher, is it?’ she exclaimed, looking up.

‘No, no. That is only nonsense,’ he said hurriedly. ‘However, love her or love her not, I can keep a corner of my heart for you, Faith. There is another brute after her, too, it seems.’

‘Of course there is: I expect there are many. Her position in society is above ours, so that it is an unwise course to go troubling yourself more about her.’

‘No. If a needy man must be so foolish as to fall in love, it is best to do so where he cannot double his foolishness by marrying the woman.’

‘I don’t like to hear you talk so slightly of what poor father did.’

‘Marriage is only an accident of situation, situation an accident of history, history of geography—and there we go.’

Christopher fixed his attention on the supper. That night, late as it was, when Faith was in bed and sleeping, he sat before a sheet of music-paper, neatly copying his composition upon it. 15046

CHAPTER IX.

A VILLAGE INN—ROOKINGTON DRIVE—CHRISTOPHER'S
ROOMS.

IN the general travellers' room of a village inn, not far from Rookington House, a young man sat about noon the next day, partaking of the most delicate luncheon that the house afforded; the chief delicacy being the whiteness of the table-cloth. This person was the painter who had sung the praises of Ethelberta at the dinner in Chevron Square. The term of Ladywell's visit to Wyndway having expired, he had returned to London, with concealed despair on matters connected with eyes, lips, hair, and so on, as observed in Ethelberta, to take his place at Mr. Doncastle's table as we have seen; and at length had sneaked down here again by the only sort of sneaking that is not mean—a lover's—to get a sight of her once more if he could possibly find her. His first disappointment was to discover that she had left Wyndway for Rookington, a house whose inmates he knew nothing of. He walked round the premises that very night.

Being a painter, he naturally felt himself compelled

to have an artist's eye for everything quaint and queer; and to-day, as he sat in the inn, whilst secretly preferring the pictorial effect of London hotels and clubs to anything the country could offer, he conscientiously scrutinised the unceiled woodwork overhead, dyed by the smoke to the hues of deep dark wines and coffees, and observed with critical clearness the panoramic series of engravings of a fox-hunt, wherein occurred the well-known melancholy portrait of a gentleman, consisting of his boots only, as they appear sticking up from the surface of a stream into which he has fallen head foremost.

Ladywell heard a footstep in the passage, and on looking round saw Christopher enter the room, bearing under his arm a roll of the music he had been at such pains to compose and copy on the previous days. Julian had an idea that he recognised the face as one which the moonlight had illuminated the night before in the park hard by, and he was certain that it was the face of the man he had seen dancing at the ball with Ethelberta. He composed his countenance as well as unconscious antagonism would allow him, went into the kitchen, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the enemy pass out.

Christopher despatched some rare old ale, which, well followed for half an hour, would have drawn 'Here's a health to all good lasses,' from the throat of a bishop, and departed in his turn, continuing his

journey towards Rookington House, with the view of obtaining audience of Ethelberta. The stroke, conventionally, was a bold one; yet, in a simple human light, it was the meekest of meek deeds, he reflected; 'and there must have been a natural impulsive time in human history, before a gimcrack social machinery came into vogue, when every man flew like an arrow to the feet of every woman who attracted him, without a thought of ceremony,' he said aloud.

Julian passed the lodge as on the previous evening, and took a short cut across the open glade, where numbers of rooks dotted the ground like parsons at a Visitation. The walk was pleasant to him, notwithstanding that it was one of those perplexing days of winter when the weather, by continually hitting on this side and on that of the division between wet and fine, is regarded as of whichever sort the mood of the observer requires as its background. In the drive before him he saw a pedestrian carrying a portfolio under his arm; but Christopher did not recognise the man as Ladywell, whom he had seen taking lunch at the inn, until he had entered the drive himself. The two young men stole an under glance at each other, felt an instinctive objection to such company on such an occasion, and walked along silently at opposite sides of the road, as uniform and as parallel in their advance as a pair of wheels on one axle, and as rigorously separate.

On nearing the house, Julian's heart began to be moved with thrills of pleasure at thoughts of Ethelberta within, but the intruder's presence exercised a constraint over his feelings. Seeing a man-servant at the front entrance, he renounced his original modest intention of going to the side door, and advanced with his music-roll, Ladywell at the same time doing the same thing.

Ladywell then got a little the better of him, and addressed the porter, whose reply Christopher heard.

'Mrs. Petherwin? She does not live here. A lady of that name was staying here for a few days at Christmas, but she has gone home now.'

At the sound of words about her, Christopher could not help blushing a good deal, and being a pale man it showed all the more. Looking to see if Ladywell observed his weakness, he saw that Ladywell was in the middle of precisely the same kind of blush at the same sound. Knowing by this that Ladywell was as shamefaced as himself about his love, Christopher stood up boldly and spoke out.

'Will you oblige me by giving me her address?'

'And me, please,' said Mr. Ladywell. 'I promised her some drawings at Wyndway the other day, and I wish to send them. It is the same Mrs. Petherwin who was at Wyndway with Lady Petherwin?'

'Yes, sir; they did go to Wyndway for a day or two, our family as well. I have heard her address, but

I don't recollect it. Perhaps when Sir James comes home he may be able to tell you.'

'Ah, thanks, but it is not—I understood that she lived here—I will call again,' stammered Ladywell, withdrawing. Christopher, keeping in an ancient exclamation as he heard his questions forestalled word for word by his companion, had also turned away; and now, pacing down the avenue, much out of heart, he heard Ladywell's footsteps behind him, fruitlessness resounding from every tread of the painter likewise. Quickening his own pace, he put greater distance between them, and proceeded homeward.

'Well, after all my trouble to find out about Ethelberta has been in vain, here comes the clue without my asking for it,' said Christopher to Faith, a few weeks after the unproductive walk to Rookington Park, described above.

She turned and saw that he was reading the 'Wessex Reflector.'

'What is it?' asked Faith.

'The secret of the true authorship of the book is out at last, and it is Ethelberta of course. I am so glad to have it proved hers.'

'But can we believe——?'

'O yes. Just hear what "Our London Correspondent" says. It is one of the nicest bits of gossip that our town friend has furnished us with for a long time

—how he must get about to find out such things! I should like to know this “London Correspondent” very much; he must be an awfully nice jovial sort of fellow.’

‘Yes: now read it, do.’

“The author of ‘Metres by Me,’” Christopher began, “a book of which so much has been said and conjectured, and one, in fact, that has been the chief talk for several weeks past of the literary circles to which I belong, is a young lady who was a widow before she reached the age of eighteen, and is now not far beyond her fourth lustrum. I was additionally informed by a friend whom I met yesterday on his way to the House of Lords, that her name is Mrs. Petherwin—Christian name Ethelberta; and that she resides with her mother-in-law at their house in Connaught Crescent. She is, moreover, the daughter of the late Bishop of Silchester (if report may be believed), whose active benevolence, as your readers know, left his family in comparatively straitened circumstances at his death. The marriage was a secret one, and much against the wish of her husband’s friends, who are wealthy people on all sides. The death of the bridegroom two or three weeks after the wedding led to a reconciliation; and the young poetess was taken to the home which she still occupies, devoted to the composition of such brilliant effusions as those the world has lately been favoured with from her pen.”’

‘If you want to send her your music, you can do so now,’ said Faith.

‘I might have sent it before, but I wanted to deliver it personally. However, it is all the same now, I suppose, whether I send it or not. I always knew that our destinies would lie apart, though she was once temporarily under a cloud. Her momentary inspiration to write that “Cancelled Words” was the worst possible omen for me. It showed that, thinking me no longer useful as a practical chance, she would make me ornamental as a poetical regret. But I’ll send the manuscript of the song.’

‘In the way of business, as a composer only ; and you must say to yourself, “Ethelberta, as thou art but woman, I dare ; but as widow, I fear thee.”’

‘Ha ha ! yes. It would have been pleasant enough to see and speak to her once more, too. But I send it only in the way of business—strictly as business, as you say, Faith.’

Notwithstanding Christopher’s affected carelessness, that evening saw a great deal of nicety bestowed upon the operation of wrapping up and sending off the song. He dropped it into the box and heard it fall, and with the curious power which he possessed of setting his wisdom to watch any particular folly in himself that it could not hinder, speculated as he walked on the result of this first tangible step of return to his old position as Ethelberta’s lover.

CHAPTER X.

A LADY'S DRAWING-ROOMS—ETHELBERTA'S
DRESSING-ROOM.

It was a house in a street on the north side of Hyde Park, between ten and eleven in the evening, and several intelligent and courteous people had assembled there to enjoy themselves as far as it was possible to do so in a neutral way—all carefully keeping every variety of feeling in a state of solution, in spite of any attempt such feelings made from time to time to crystallise on interesting subjects in hand.

‘Neigh, who is that charming woman with her head built up in a novel way even for hair architecture—the one with her back towards us?’ said a man whose coat fitted doubtfully to a friend whose coat fitted well.

‘Just going to ask for the same information,’ said Mr. Neigh, determining the very longest hair in his beard to an infinitesimal nicety by drawing its lower portion through his fingers. ‘I have quite forgotten—cannot keep people’s names in my head at all; nor could my father either—nor any of my family—a very

odd thing. But my old friend Mrs. Napper knows for certain.' And he turned to one of a small group of middle-aged persons near, who, instead of skimming the surface of things in general, like the rest of the company, were going into the very depths of them.

'Oh—that is the celebrated Mrs. Petherwin, the woman who makes rhymes and prints 'em,' said Mrs. Napper, in a detached sentence, and then continued talking again to those on the other side of her.

The two loungers went on with their observations of Ethelberta's headdress, which, though not extraordinary or eccentric, did certainly convey an idea of indefinable novelty. Observers were sometimes half inclined to think that her cuts and modes were acquired by some secret communication with the mysterious clique which orders the livery of the fashionable world, for—and it affords a parallel to cases in which clever thinkers in other spheres arrive independently at one and the same conclusion—Ethelberta's fashion often turned out to be the coming one.

'Oh, is that the woman at last?' said Neigh, diminishing his broad general gaze at the room to a wrinkled criticism of Ethelberta.

'“The rhymes,” as Mrs. Napper calls them, are not to be despised,' said his companion. 'The writer's opinions of life and society differ very materially from mine, but I cannot help admiring her in the more reflective pieces; the songs I don't care for. The method

in which she handles curious subjects, and at the same time impresses us with a full conviction of her modesty, is very adroit, and somewhat blinds us to the fact that no such poems were demanded of her at all.'

'I have not read them,' said Neigh, secretly wrestling with his jaw, to prevent a yawn; 'but I suppose I must. The truth is, that I never care much for reading what one ought to read; I wish I did, but I cannot help it. And, no doubt, you admire the lady immensely for writing them: I don't. Everybody is so talented now-a-days that the only people I care to honour as deserving real distinction are those who remain in obscurity. I am myself hoping for a corner in some biographical dictionary when the time comes for those works only to contain lists of the exceptional individuals of whom nothing is known but that they lived and died.'

'Ah—listen. They are going to sing one of her songs,' said his friend, looking towards a bustling movement in the neighbourhood of the piano. 'I believe that song "When tapers tall," has been set to music by three or four composers already.'

'Men of any note?' said Neigh, at last beaten by his yawn, which courtesy nevertheless confined within his person to such an extent that only a few unimportant symptoms, such as reduced eyes and a certain rectangular manner of mouth in speaking, were visible.

'Scarcely,' replied the other man. 'Established

writers of music do not expend their energies upon new verse until they find that such verse is likely to endure; for should the poet be soon forgotten, their labour is in some degree lost.'

'Artful dogs—who would have thought it?' said Neigh, just as an exercise in words; and they drew nearer to the piano, less to become listeners to the singing than to be spectators of the scene in that quarter. But among some others the interest in the songs seemed to be very great; and it was unanimously wished that the young lady who had practised the different pieces of music privately would sing some of them now in the order of their composers' reputations. The musical persons in the room unconsciously resolved themselves into a committee of taste.

One and another had been tried, when, at the end of the third, a lady spoke to Ethelberta.

'Now, Mrs. Petherwin,' she said, gracefully throwing back her face, 'your opinion is by far the most valuable. In which of the cases do you consider the marriage of verse and tune to have been most successful?'

Ethelberta, finding these and other unexpected calls made upon herself, came to the front without flinching.

'The sweetest and the best that I like by far,' she said, 'is none of these. It is one which reached me by post only this morning from a place in Wessex, and is written by an unheard-of man who lives somewhere

down there—a man who will be, nevertheless, heard a great deal of some day, I hope—think. I have only practised it this afternoon; but, if one's own judgment is worth anything, it is the best.'

A deaf gentleman who was standing with a friend in the rear declared privately to him upon this that what Mrs. Petherwin said was quite true, and that Wessex was in his judgment as well as hers a very picturesque part of England.

'Let us have your favourite, by all means,' said another friend of Ethelberta's who was present—Mrs. Doncastle.

'I am so sorry that I cannot oblige you, since you wish to hear it,' replied the poetess, regretfully; 'but the music is at home. I had not received it when I lent the others to Miss Belmaine, and it is only in manuscript like the rest.'

'Could it not be sent for?' suggested an enthusiast who knew that Ethelberta lived only in the next street, appealing by a look to her, and then to the mistress of the house.

'Certainly, let us send for it,' said that lady. A footman was at once quietly despatched with precise directions as to where Christopher's sweet production might be found.

'What—is there going to be something interesting?' asked a young married friend of Mrs. Napper, who had returned to her original spot.

‘Yes—the best song she has written is to be sung in the best manner to the best air that has been composed for it. I should not wonder if she were going to sing it herself.’

‘Did you know anything of Mrs. Petherwin until her name leaked out in connection with these ballads?’

‘No; but I think I recollect seeing her once before. She is one of those people who are known, as one may say, by subscription: everybody knows a little, till she is astonishingly well known altogether; but nobody knows her entirely. She was the orphan child of some clergyman, I believe. Lady Petherwin, her mother-in-law, has been taking her about a great deal latterly.’

‘She has apparently a very good prospect.’

‘Yes; and it is through her being of that curious undefined character which interprets itself to each admirer as whatever he would like to have it. Old men like her because she is so girlish; youths because she is womanly; wicked men because she is good in their eyes; good men because she is wicked in theirs.’

‘She must be a very anomalous sort of woman, at that rate.’

‘Yes. Like the British Constitution, she owes her success in practice to her inconsistencies in principle.’

‘These poems must have set her up. She appears to be quite the correct spectacle. Happy Mrs. Petherwin!’

The subject of their dialogue was engaged in a conversation with Mrs. Belmaine upon the management

of households—a theme provoked by a discussion that was in progress in the pages of some periodical of the time. Mrs. Belmaine was very full of the argument, and went on from point to point till she came to servants.

The face of Ethelberta showed caution at once.

‘I consider that Lady Plamby pets her servants by far too much,’ said Mrs. Belmaine. ‘Oh, you do not know her? Well, she is a woman with theories; and she lends her maids and men books of the wrong kind for their station, and sends them to picture-exhibitions which they don’t in the least understand—all for the improvement of their taste, and morals, and nobody knows what besides. It only makes them dissatisfied.’

The face of Ethelberta showed venturesomeness. ‘Yes, and dreadfully ambitious!’ she said.

‘Yes, indeed. What a turn the times have taken! People of that sort push on, and get into business, and get great warehouses, until at last, without ancestors, or family, or name, or estate——’

‘Or the merest scrap of heirloom or family jewel.’

‘Or heirlooms, or family jewels, they are thought as much of as if their forefathers had glided unobtrusively through the peerage——’

‘Ever since the first edition.’

‘Yes.’ Mrs. Belmaine, who really sprang from a good old family, had been going to say, ‘for the last seven hundred years,’ but fancying from Ethelberta’s

addendum that she might not date back more than a trifling century or so, adopted the suggestion with her usual well-known courtesy, and blushed down to her locket at the thought of the mistake that she might have made. This sensitiveness was a trait in her character which gave great gratification to her husband, and, indeed, to all who knew her.

‘And have you any theory on the vexed question of servant-government?’ continued Mrs. Belmaine, smiling. ‘But no—the subject is of far too practical a nature for one of your bent, of course.’

‘O no—it is not at all too practical. I have thought of the matter often,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I think the best plan would be for somebody to write a pamphlet, “The Shortest Way with the Servants,” just as there was once written a terribly stinging one, “The Shortest Way with the Dissenters,” which had a great effect.’

‘I have always understood that that was written by a dissenter as a satire upon the Church?’

‘Ah—so it was : but the example will do to illustrate my meaning.’

‘Quite so—I understand—so it will,’ said Mrs. Belmaine, with clouded faculties.

Meanwhile Christopher’s music had arrived. . An accomplished gentleman who had every musical talent except that of creation, scanned the notes carefully from top to bottom, and sat down to accompany the singer. There was no lady present of sufficient confi-

dence or skill to venture into a song she had never seen before, and the only one who had seen it was Ethelberta herself; she did not deny having practised it the greater part of the afternoon, and was very willing to sing it now if anybody would derive pleasure from the performance. Then she began, and the sweetness of her singing was such that even the most unsympathetic honoured her by looking as if they would be willing to listen to every note the song contained if it were not quite so much trouble to do so. Some were so interested that, instead of continuing their conversation, they remained in silent consideration of how they would continue it when she had finished; while the particularly civil people arranged their countenances into every attentive form that the mind could devise. One emotional gentleman looked at the corner of a chair as if, till that moment such an object had never crossed his vision before; the movement of his finger to the imagined tune was, for the deaf old clergyman, a perfect mine of interest; whilst a young man from the country was powerless to put an end to an enchanted gaze at nothing at all in the exact middle of the room before him. Neigh, and the general phalanx of cool men and celebrated club yawners, were so much affected that they raised their chronic look of great objection to such things to an expression of scarcely any objection at all.

‘What makes it so interesting,’ said Mrs. Doncastle

to Ethelberta, when the song was over and she had retired from the focus of the company, 'is, that it is played from the composer's own copy, which has never met the public eye, or any other than his own before to-day. And I see that he has actually sketched in the lines by hand, instead of having ruled paper—just as the great old composers used to do. You must have been as pleased to get it fresh from the stocks like that as he probably was pleased to get your thanks.'

Ethelberta became reflective. She had not thanked Christopher ; moreover, she had decided, after some consideration, that she ought not to thank him. What new thoughts were suggested by that remark of Mrs. Doncastle's, and what new inclination resulted from the public presentation of his tune and her words as parts of one organic whole, are best explained by describing her doings at a later hour, when, having left her friends somewhat early, she had reached home and retired from public view for that evening.

Ethelberta went to her room, sent away the maid, who did double duty for herself and Lady Petherwin, walked in circles about the carpet till the fire had grown haggard and cavernous, sighed, took a sheet of paper and wrote :

‘ Dear Mr. Julian,

‘ I have said I would not write : I have said it twice ; but discretion, under some circumstances,

is only another name for unkindness. Before thanking you for your sweet gift, let me tell you in a few words of something which may materially change an aspect of affairs under which I appear to you to deserve it.

‘With regard to my history and origin you are altogether mistaken; and how can I tell whether your bitterness at my previous silence on those points on the past days may not cause you to withdraw your act of courtesy now? But the gratification of having at last been honest with you may compensate even for the loss of your respect.

‘The matter is a small one to tell, after all. What will you say on learning that I am not the trodden-down “lady by birth” that you have supposed me? That my father is not dead, as you probably imagine; that he is working for his living as one among a peculiarly stigmatised and ridiculed multitude?

‘Had he been a brawny cottager, carpenter, mason, blacksmith, well-digger, navvy, tree-feller—any effective and manly trade, in short, a worker in which can stand up in the face of the noblest and daintiest, and bare his gnarled arms and say, with a consciousness of superior power, “Look at a real man!” I should have been able to show you antecedents which, if not intensely romantic, are not altogether antagonistic to romance. But the present fashion of associating with one particular class everything that is ludicrous and bombastic overpowers me when I think of it in relation

to myself and your known sensitiveness. When the well-born poetess of good report melts into”

Having got thus far, a fainthearted look, which had begun to show itself several sentences earlier, became pronounced. She threw the writing into the dull fire, poked and stirred it till a red inflammation crept over the sheet, and then started anew :

‘Dear Mr. Julian,

‘Not knowing your present rank as composer—whether on the very brink of fame, or as yet a long way off—I cannot decide what form of expression my earnest acknowledgments should take. Let me simply say in one short phrase, I thank you infinitely !’

‘I am no musician, and my opinion on music may not be worth much : yet I know what I like (as everybody says, but I do not use the words as a form to cover a hopeless blank on all connected with the subject), and this sweet air I love. You must have glided like a breeze about me—seen into a heart not worthy of scrutiny, jotted down words that cannot justify attention—before you could have apotheosised the song in so exquisite a manner. My gratitude took the form of wretchedness when, on hearing the effect of the ballad in public this evening, I thought that I had not power to withhold a reply which might do us both more

harm than good. Then I said "Away with all emotion—I wish the world was drained dry of it—I will take no notice," when a lady whispered at my elbow to the effect that of course I had expressed my gratification to you. I ought first to have mentioned that your creation has been played to-night to full drawing-rooms, and the original tones cooled the artificial air like a fountain almost.

'I prophesy great things of you. Perhaps, at the time when we are each but a row of bones in our individual graves, your genius will be remembered, while my mere cleverness will have been long forgotten.

'But—you must allow a woman of experience to say this—the undoubted power that you possess will do you socially no good unless you mix with it the ingredient of ambition—a quality in which I fear you are very deficient. It is in the hope of stimulating you to a better opinion of yourself that I write this letter.

'Probably I shall never meet you again. Not that I think circumstances to be particularly powerful to prevent such a meeting, rather it is that I shall energetically avoid it. There can be no such thing as strong friendship between a man and a woman not of one family.

'More than that there must not be, and this is why we will not meet. You see that I do not mince matters at all; but it is hypocrisy to avoid touching upon a subject which all men and women in our position

inevitably think of, no matter what they say. Some women might have written distantly, and wept at the repression of their real feeling; but it is better to be more frank, and keep a dry eye.

‘Yours,

‘ETHELBERTA.’

Her feet felt cold and her heart weak as she directed the letter, and she was overpowered with weariness. But murmuring ‘If I let it stay till the morning I shall not send it, and a man may be lost to fame because of a woman’s squeamishness—it shall go,’ she partially dressed herself, wrapped a large cloak around her, descended the stairs, and went out to the pillar-box at the corner, leaving the door not quite close. No gust of wind had realised her misgivings that it might be blown shut on her return, and she re-entered as softly as she had emerged.

It will be seen that Ethelberta had said nothing about her family after all.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY PETHERWIN'S HOUSE.

THE next day old Lady Petherwin, who had not accompanied Ethelberta the night before, came into the morning-room, with a newspaper in her hand.

‘What does this mean, Ethelberta?’ she enquired in tones from which every shade of human expressiveness was extracted by some awful and imminent mood that lay behind. She was pointing to a paragraph under the heading of ‘Literary Notes,’ which contained in a few words the announcement of Ethelberta’s authorship that had more circumstantially appeared in the ‘Wessex Reflector.’

‘It means what it says,’ said Ethelberta, quietly.

‘Then it is true?’

‘Yes. I must apologise for having kept it such a secret from you. It was not done in the spirit that you may imagine: it was merely to avoid disturbing your mind that I did it so privately.’

‘But surely you have not written every one of those ribald verses?’

Ethelberta looked inclined to exclaim most vehe-

mently against this; but what she actually did say was, "Ribald"—what do you mean by that? I don't think that you are aware what "ribald" means.'

'I am not sure that I am. As regards some words, as well as some persons, the less you are acquainted with them the more it is to your credit.'

'I don't quite deserve this, Lady Petherwin.'

'Really, one would imagine that women wrote their books during those dreams in which people have no moral sense, to see how improper some, even virtuous, ladies become when they get into print.'

'I might have done a much more unnatural thing than write those poems. And perhaps I might have done a much better thing, and got less praise.' But that's the world's fault, not mine.'

'You might have left them unwritten, and shown more fidelity.'

'Fidelity! it is more a matter of humour than principle. What has fidelity to do with it?'

'Fidelity to my dear boy's memory.'

'It would be difficult to show that because I have written so-called tender and gay verse, I feel tender and gay. It is too often assumed that a person's fancy is a person's real mind. I believe that in the majority of cases one is fond of imagining the direct opposite of one's principles in sheer effort after something fresh and free; at any rate, some of the lightest of those rhymes were composed between the deepest fits of

dismals I have ever known. However, I did expect that you might judge in the way you have judged, and that was my chief reason for not telling you what I had done.'

'You don't deny that you tried to escape from recollections you ought to have cherished? There is only one thing that women of your sort are as ready to do as to take a man's name, and that is, drop his memory.'

'Dear Lady Petherwin—don't be so unreasonable as to blame a live person for living! No woman's head is so small as to be filled for life by a memory of a few months. Four years have passed since I last saw my boy-husband. We were mere children; see how I have altered since in mind, substance, and outline—I have even grown half an inch taller since his death. Two years will exhaust the regrets of widows who have long been faithful wives; and ought I not to show a little new life when my husband died in the honeymoon?'

'No. Accepting the protection of your husband's mother was, in effect, an avowal that you rejected the idea of being a widow to prolong the idea of being a wife; and the sin against your conventional state thus assumed is almost as bad as would have been a sin against the married state itself. If you had gone off when he died, saying, "Thank heaven, I am free!" you would, at any rate, have shown some real honesty.'

‘I should have been more virtuous by being more unfeeling. That often happens.’

‘I have taken to you, and made a great deal of you—given you the inestimable advantages of foreign travel and good society to enlarge your mind. In short, I have been like a Naomi to you in everything, and I maintain that writing these poems saps the foundation of it all.’

‘I do own that you have been a very good Naomi to me thus far; but Ruth was quite a fast widow in comparison with me, and yet Naomi never blamed her. You are unfortunate in your illustration. But it is dreadfully flippant of me to answer you like this, for you have been kind. But why will you provoke me!’

‘Yes, you are flippant, Ethelberta. You are too much given to that sort of thing.’

‘Well, I don’t know how the secret of my name has leaked out; and I am not ribald, or anything you say,’ said Ethelberta, with a sigh.

‘Then you own you do not feel so ardent as you seem in your book?’

‘I do own it.’

‘And that you are sorry your name has been published in connection with it?’

‘I am.’

‘And you think the verses may tend to misrepresent your character as a gay and rapturous one, when it is not?’

‘I do fear it.’

‘Then, of course, you will suppress the poems instantly. That is the only way in which you can regain the position you have hitherto held with me.’

Ethelberta said nothing; and the dull winter atmosphere had far from light enough in it to show by her face what she might be thinking.

‘Well?’ said Lady Petherwin.

‘I did not expect such a command as that,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I have been obedient for four years, and would continue so—but I cannot suppress the poems. They are not mine now to suppress.’

‘You must get them into your hands. Money will do it, I suppose?’

‘Yes, I suppose it would—a thousand pounds.’

‘Very well; the money shall be forthcoming,’ said Lady Petherwin after a pause. ‘You had better sit down and write about it at once.’

‘I cannot do it,’ said Ethelberta; ‘and I will not. I don’t wish them to be suppressed. I am not ashamed of them; there is nothing to be ashamed of in them; and I shall not take any steps in the matter.’

‘Then you are an ungrateful woman, and wanting in natural affection for the dead!’

‘That’s an intolerable——’

Lady Petherwin crashed out of the room in a wind of indignation, and went upstairs and heard no more. Adjoining her chamber was a smaller one called her

study, and, on reaching this, she unlocked a cabinet, took out a small deed-box, removed from it a folded packet, unfolded it, crumpled it up, and turning round suddenly flung it into the fire. Then she stood and beheld it eaten away word after word by the flames. ‘Testament,’—‘all that freehold,’—‘heirs and assigns’ appearing occasionally for a moment only to disappear for ever. Nearly half the document had turned into a glossy black when the old lady clasped her hands.

‘What have I done!’ she exclaimed. Springing to the tongs she seized with them the portion of the writing yet unconsumed, and dragged it out of the fire. Ethelberta appeared at the door.

‘Quick, Ethelberta!’ said Lady Petherwin. ‘Help me to put this out!’ And the two women went trampling wildly upon the document and smothering it with a corner of the hearth-rug.

‘What is it?’ said Ethelberta.

‘My will!’ said Lady Petherwin. ‘I have kept it by me lately, for I have wished to look over it at leisure——’

‘Good heavens!’ said Ethelberta, trampling more wildly than ever. ‘And I was just coming in to tell you that I would always cling to you, and never desert you, ill-use me how you might!’

‘Such an affectionate remark sounds curious at such a time,’ said Lady Petherwin, sinking down in a chair at the end of the struggle.

‘But,’ cried Ethelberta, ‘you don’t suppose——’

‘Selfishness, my dear, has given me such crooked looks that I can see it round a corner.’

‘If you mean that what is yours to give may not be mine to take, it would be as well to name it in an impersonal way, if you must name it at all,’ said the daughter-in-law, with wet eyelids. ‘God knows I had no selfish thought in saying that. I came upstairs to ask you to forgive me, and knew nothing about the will. But every explanation distorts it all the more!’

‘We two have got all awry, dear—it cannot be concealed—awry—awry. Ah, who shall set us right again? However, now I must send for Mr. Chancerly—no, I am going out on other business, and I will call upon him. There, don’t spoil your eyes: you may have to sell them.’

She rang the bell and ordered the carriage; and half-an-hour later Lady Petherwin’s coachman drove his mistress up to the door of her lawyer’s office in Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

CHAPTER XII.

SANDBOURNE AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD.

WHILE this was going on in town, Christopher, at his lodgings in Sandbourne, had been thrown into rare old visions and dreams by the appearance of Ethelberta's letter. Flattered and encouraged to ambition as well as to love by her inspiring sermon, he put off now the last remnant of cynical doubt upon the genuineness of his old mistress, and once and for all set down as disloyal a belief he had latterly acquired that 'Come, woo me, woo me ; for I am like enough to consent,' was all a young woman had to tell.

All the reasoning of political and social economists would not have convinced Christopher that he had a better chance in London than in Sandbourne of making a decent income by reasonable and likely labour ; but a belief in a far more improbable proposition, impetuously expressed, warmed him with the idea that he might become famous there. The greater is frequently more readily credited than the less, and an argument which will not convince on a matter of halfpence appears unanswerable when applied to questions

of glory and honour. The regulation wet towel and strong coffee of the ambitious and intellectual student floated before him in visions; but it was with a sense of relief that he remembered that music, in spite of its drawbacks as a means of sustenance, was a profession happily unencumbered with those excruciating preliminaries to greatness.

Christopher talked about the new move to his sister, as may be supposed, and he was vexed that her hopefulness was not roused to quite the pitch of his own. As with others of his sort, his too general habit of accepting the most clouded possibility that chances offered was only transcended by his readiness to kindle with a fitful excitement now and then. Faith was much more equable. 'If you were not the most melancholy man God ever created,' she said, kindly looking at his vague deep eyes and thin face, which was but a few degrees too refined and poetical to escape the epithet of lantern-jawed from anyone who had quarrelled with him, 'you would not mind my coolness about this. It is a good thing of course to go; I have always fancied that we were mistaken in coming here. Mediocrity stamped "London" fetches more than talent marked "provincial." But I cannot feel so enthusiastic.'

'Still, if we are to go, we may as well go by enthusiasm as by calculation; it is a sensation pleasanter to

the nerves, and leads to just as good a result when there is only one result possible.'

'Very well,' said Faith, 'I will not depress you by talking my philosophies. If I had to describe you, Kit, I should say you were a child in your impulses and an old man in your reflections.'

'What else should an individual be when impulse is what remains in us from childhood, and reflection what accumulates with age? I would rather make hay in wet weather than be with people who are always alike. However, this is not said of myself, for I have often thought that if I knew a man exactly like myself in every particular, I should not care much about him.'

'And if I knew a woman as I know myself, without her being exactly like myself, I should think her very objectionable.'

'There's the difference. Well, I am going out now, Faith. Come along with me.'

When they had walked a little way, Faith entered a shop to make some small purchase, and Julian went slowly on. Looking down as he loitered, his eyes fell upon a white handkerchief lying on the pavement, and he picked it up. Ahead of him was apparently the female who had dropped it. Christopher doubled the length of his strides and came up almost beside her. She was his little friend the pupil-teacher, and Christopher hesitated. Surely she had not dropped her

handkerchief on purpose? The thought was confusing, and he turned back without her having seen his approach, and joined Faith, who was now coming up.

‘Faith,’ he said, ‘that young lady has dropped her handkerchief; do hasten on, and restore it to her. I am going this way.’

Faith went on as bidden, and Christopher turned aside. He was slightly disconcerted some time after, on turning back from a ramble, to find himself encountering the girl again, now walking beside Faith, who had entered into conversation with her. Christopher, fancying that neither of them noticed him, thought it best to pass by on the other side quietly, without looking towards them. It proved, however, that both of them did see him, when Picotée blushed painfully; whereupon Faith opened her eyes.

The brother and sister did not meet again till the evening. ‘Did you restore the handkerchief?’ Christopher carelessly asked.

‘Not to the person you pointed out,’ she said. ‘I offered it to her, but it was not hers; she knew nothing about it. And then we saw a lady looking for it, and I gave it to her. Who was that young person—do you know? She seemed to know me and all about our family; so, owing to that and the mistake about the handkerchief, we got quite friends.’

‘Oh, she is a pupil-teacher at the schools in Common Street.’

‘Only that? Her dress seems beyond her rank; she must be one of a good family grown poor. Why in our best times I myself never wore anything richer in material—or even so rich; but the cut of her clothes being old-fashioned, its goodness escapes notice almost. And when I asked if she had dropped her handkerchief before saying “No,” she looked to see, and I just discerned that the one she carried was widely bordered with what had once been really good lace. Well, it being a beautiful day, I walked on out of the town, and so did she, and then we said a little more and a little more to each other, till I found out something in a very odd way. We met a man, and I saw from her manner at passing him that she loved him, poor girl; and I fancy the young man, whoever he may be, does not care in the least about her.’ Faith looked at him closely.

‘That’s very unfortunate,’ said Christopher, placidly; and she knew from his manner that he was not remarking that he held the cardinal place in the story himself.

‘Yes;’ Faith continued, ‘and when I suspected it, and looked her in the face, she blushed painfully, and tears came into her eyes. And when she saw that I noticed her confusion, she quite trembled. It is very foolish of girls, I think, to fling themselves at random at men who may all the time be despising them; I could not help giving her a little lecture about it, which she took very kindly.’

‘Did you tell her that you were soon going to London?’

‘Yes—I just mentioned it. She was quite impressed with the idea, and said she wished from her heart that she was going too. And have you been considering, Kit, any more about when we shall go, and so on?’

‘Yes.’

‘What have you thought?’

‘That we may very well leave the place in six weeks, if we wish.’

‘We really may!’

‘Yes. And what is more, we will.’

Faith decided to say no more about Picotee, on the general ground of its inexpedience.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOME LONDON STREETS.

CHRISTOPHER and Faith arrived in London on an afternoon at the end of winter, and beheld from one of the river bridges snow-white scrolls of steam from the tall chimneys of Lambeth rising against the livid sky behind, as if drawn in chalk on toned cardboard.

The first thing he did that evening, when settled in their apartments near the British Museum, before applying himself to the beginning of the means by which success in life was to be attained, was to go out in the direction of Ethelberta's door, leaving Faith unpacking the things, and sniffing extraordinary smoke-smells which she discovered in all nooks and crannies of the rooms. It was some satisfaction to see Ethelberta's house, although the single feature in which it differed from the other houses in the Crescent was that no lamp shone from the fanlight over the entrance—a speciality which, if he cared for omens, was hardly encouraging. Fearing to linger near lest he might be detected, Christopher stole a glimpse at the door and at the steps, imagined what a trifle of the depression worn

in each step her feet had tended to produce, and strolled home again.

Feeling that his reasons for calling just now were scarcely sufficient, he went next day about the business that had brought him to town, which referred to a situation as organist in a large church in the north-west district. The post was half ensured already, and he intended to make of it the nucleus of a professional occupation and income. Then he sat down to think of the preliminary steps towards publishing the song that had so pleased her, and had also, as far as he could understand from her letter, hit the popular taste very successfully; a fact which, however little it may say for the virtues of the song, as a composition, was a great recommendation to it as a property. Christopher was delighted to perceive, as if it were a chance discovery, that out of this position he could frame an admissible, if not an unimpeachable, reason for calling upon Ethelberta. He determined to do so at once, and obtain the required permission by word of mouth.

He was greatly surprised, when the front of the house appeared in view on this spring afternoon, to see what a white and sightless aspect pervaded all the windows. He came close: the eyeball blankness was caused by all the shutters and blinds being shut tight from top to bottom. Possibly this had been the case for some time—he could not tell. In one of the

windows was a card bearing the announcement 'This House to be let Furnished.'

Here was a merciless clash between fancy and fact. Regretting now his faintheartedness in not letting her know beforehand by some means that he was about to make a new start in the world, and coming to dwell near her, Christopher rang the bell to make enquiries. A gloomy sort of caretaker appeared after a while, and the young man asked whither the ladies had gone to live. He was beyond measure depressed to learn that they were in the South of France—Arles, the man thought the place was called—the time of their return to town being very uncertain; though one thing was clear, they meant to miss the forthcoming London season altogether.

As Christopher's hope to see her again had brought a resolve to do so, so now resolve led to dogged patience. Instead of attempting anything by letter, he decided to wait; and he waited well, occupying himself in publishing a 'March' and a 'Morning and Evening Service in E flat.' Some four-part songs, too, engaged his attention when the heavier duties of the day were over—these duties being the giving of lessons in harmony and counterpoint, in which he was aided by the introductions of a man well known in the musical world, who had been acquainted with young Julian as a promising amateur long before he adopted music as the staff of his pilgrimage.

It was the end of summer when he again tried his fortune at the house in Connaught Crescent. Scarcely calculating upon finding her at this stagnant time of the town year, and only hoping for information, Julian was surprised and excited to see the shutters open, and the house wearing altogether a living look, its neighbours having decidedly died off meanwhile.

‘The family here,’ said a footman in answer to his enquiry, ‘are only temporary tenants of the house. It is not Lady Petherwin’s people.’

‘Do you know the Petherwins’ present address?’

‘Underground, sir, for the old lady. She died some time ago in Switzerland, and was buried there, I believe.’

‘And Mrs. Petherwin—the young lady?’ said Christopher, starting.

‘We are not acquainted personally with the family,’ the man replied. ‘My master has only taken the house for a few months, whilst extensive alterations are being made in his own on the other side of the park, which he goes to look after every day. If you want any further information about Lady Petherwin, Mrs. Petherwin will probably give it. I can let you have her address.’

‘Ah, yes; thank you,’ said Christopher.

The footman handed him one of some cards which appeared to have been left for the purpose. Julian, though tremblingly anxious to know where Ethelberta

was, did not look at it till he could take a cool survey in private. The address was 'Arrowthorne Lodge, Wessex.'

'Dear me!' said Christopher to himself, 'not far from Melchester; and not dreadfully far from Sandbourne.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ARROWTHORNE PARK AND LODGE.

SUMMER was just over when Christopher Julian found himself rattling along in the train on the way to Sandbourne on some trifling business appertaining to his late father's affairs, which would afford him an excuse for calling at Arrowthorne about the song of hers that he wished to produce. He alighted in the afternoon at a little station some twenty miles short of Sandbourne, and leaving his portmanteau behind him there, decided to walk across the fields, obtain if possible the interview with the lady, and return then to the station to finish the journey to Sandbourne, which he could thus reach at a convenient hour in the evening, and, if he chose, take leave of again the next day.

It was an afternoon which had a fungous smell out of doors, all being sunless and stagnant overhead and around. The various species of trees had begun to assume the more distinctive colours of their decline, and where there had been one broad pervasive brownish green were now twenty greenish yellows, the air in the

vistas between them being half opaque with blue exhalation. Christopher in his walk overtook a countryman, and enquired if the path they were following would take him to Arrowthorne Lodge.

‘’Twill take ’ee into Arr’thorne Park,’ the man replied. ‘But you won’t come anigh the Lodge, unless you bear round to the left as might be.’

‘Mrs. Petherwin lives there, I believe?’

‘No, sir. Leastwise unless she’s but lately come. I have never heard of such a woman.’

‘She may possibly be only visiting there.’

‘Ah, perhaps that’s the shape o’t. Well, now you tell o’t, I have seen a strange face thereabouts once or twice lately. A young good-looking maid enough, seemingly.’

‘Yes, she’s considered a very handsome lady.’

‘I’ve heard the woodmen say, now that you tell o’t, that they meet her every now and then, just at the closing in of the day, as they come home along with their nitches of sticks; ay, stalking about under the trees by herself—a tall black martel, so long-legged and awful-like that you’d think ’twas the old feller himself a coming, they say. Now a woman must be a queer body to my thinking, to roam about by night so lonesome and that. Ay, now that you tell o’t, there is such a woman, but ’a never have showed in the parish; sure I never thought who the body was—no, not once about her, nor where ’a was living and that—

not I, till you spoke. Well, there, sir, that's Arr'thorne Lodge; do you see they three elms?' He pointed across the glade towards some confused foliage a long way off.

'I am not sure about the sort of tree you mean,' said Christopher, 'I see a number of trees with edges shaped like edges of clouds.'

'Ay, ay, they be oaks; I mean the elms to the left hand.'

'But a man can hardly tell oaks from elms at that distance, my good fellow!'

'That 'a can very well—leastwise, if he's got the sense.'

'Well I think I see what you mean,' said Christopher. 'What next?'

'When you get there, you bear away smart to nor'west, and you'll come straight as a line to the Lodge.'

'How the deuce am I to know which is northwest in a strange place, with no sun to tell me?'

'What, not know nor'west? Well, I should think a boy could never live and grow up to be a man without knowing the four quarters. I knowed 'em when I was a mossel of a chiel. We be no great scholars here, that's true, but there isn't a Jack-rag or Tom-straw in these parts that don't know where they lie as well as I. Now I've lived, man and boy, these eight-and-sixty years, and never met a man in my life

afore who hadn't learnt such a common thing as the four quarters.'

Christopher parted from his companion and soon reached a stile, clambering over which he entered a park. Here he threaded his way, and rounding a clump of aged trees the young man came in view of a light and elegant country-house in the half-timbered Gothic style of the late revival, apparently only a few years old. Surprised at finding himself so near, Christopher's heart fluttered unmanageably till he had taken an abstract view of his position, and, in impatience at his want of nerve, adopted a sombre train of reasoning to convince himself that, far from indulgence in the passion of love bringing bliss, it was a folly, leading to grief and disquiet—certainly one which would do him no good. Cooled down by this, he stepped into the drive and went up to the house.

'Is Mrs. Petherwin at home?' he said, modestly.

'Who did you say, sir?'

He repeated the name.

'Don't know the person.'

'The lady may be a visitor—I call on business.'

'She is not visiting in this house, sir.'

'Is not this Arrowthorne Lodge?'

'Certainly not.'

'Then where is Arrowthorne Lodge, please?'

'Well, it is nearly a mile from here. Under the trees by the high road. If you go across by that

footpath it will bring you out quicker than by following the bend of the drive.'

Christopher wondered how he could have managed to get into the wrong park; but, setting it down to his ignorance of the difference between oak and elm, he immediately retraced his steps, passing across the park again, through the gate at the end of the drive, and into the turnpike road. No other gate, park, or country-seat of any description was within view.

'Can you tell me the way to Arrowthorne Lodge?' he enquired of the first person he met, who was a little girl.

'You are just coming away from it, sir,' said she. 'I'll show you; I am going that way.'

They walked along together. Getting abreast the entrance of the park he had just emerged from, the child said, 'There it is, sir; I live there too.'

Christopher, with a dazed countenance, looked towards a cottage which stood nestling in the shrubbery and ivy like a mushroom among grass. 'Is that Arrowthorne Lodge?' he repeated.

'Yes, and if you go up the drive, you come to Arrowthorne House.'

'Arrowthorne Lodge—where Mrs. Petherwin lives, I mean.'

'Yes. She lives there along wi' mother and we. But she don't want anybody to know it, sir, 'cause she's celebrate, and 'twouldn't do at all.'

Christopher said no more, and the little girl became interested in the products of the bank and ditch by the wayside. He left her, pushed open the heavy gate, and tapped at the Lodge door.

The latch was lifted. 'Does Mrs. Petherwin,' he began, and, determined that there should be no mistake, repeated, 'Does Mrs. Ethelberta Petherwin, the poetess, live here?' turning full upon the person who opened the door.

'She does, sir,' said a faltering voice; and he found himself face to face with the pupil-teacher of Sandbourne.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LODGE, *continued*—THE COPSE BEHIND.

‘THIS is indeed a surprise; I—am glad to see you!’ Christopher stammered, with a wire-drawn, radically different smile from the one he had intended—a smile not without a tinge of ghastliness.

‘Yes—I am home for the holidays,’ said the blushing maiden; and, after a critical pause, she added, ‘If you wish to speak to my sister, she is in the plantation with the children.’

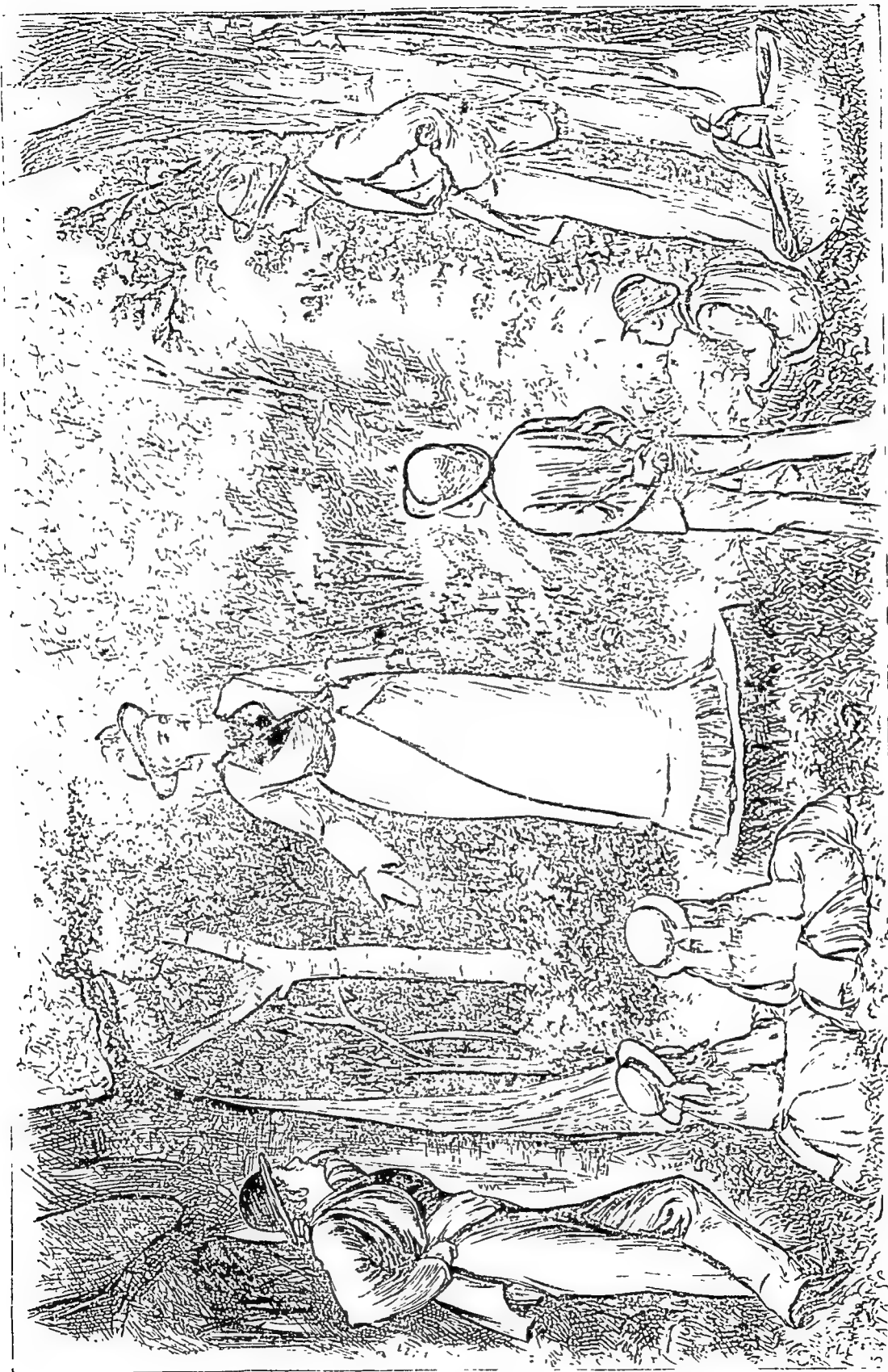
‘O no—no, thank you—not necessary at all,’ said Christopher, in haste. ‘I only wished for an interview with a lady called Mrs. Petherwin.’

‘Yes; Mrs. Petherwin—my sister,’ said Picotee. ‘She is in the plantation. That little path will take you to her in five minutes.’

The amazed Christopher persuaded himself that this discovery was very delightful, and went on persuading so long that at last he felt it to be so. Unable, like many other people, to enjoy being satirised in words because of the irritation it caused him as aimed-at victim, he sometimes had philosophy enough to appreciate a satire of circumstance, because nobody

intended it. Pursuing the path indicated, he found himself in a thicket of scrubby undergrowth, which covered an area enclosed from the park proper by a decaying fence. The boughs were so tangled that in following the obstructed track it became necessary to screen his face with his hands to escape the risk of having his eyes filliped out by the twigs that impeded his progress. Thus slowly advancing, his ear caught, between the rustles, the tones of a voice engaged in earnest declamation; and, pushing round in that direction, he beheld through some beech boughs an open space about ten yards in diameter, floored at the bottom with deep beds of curled old leaves from foregone years, and cushions of furry moss. In the middle of this natural theatre was the stump of a tree that had been felled by a saw, and upon the flat stool thus formed stood Ethelberta, whom Christopher had not beheld since the ball at Wyndway House.

Round her, leaning against branches or prostrate on the ground, were five or six individuals. Two were young mechanics—one of them evidently a carpenter. Then there was a boy about thirteen, and two or three younger children. Ethelberta's appearance answered as fully as ever to that of an English lady skilfully perfected in manner, carriage, look, and accent; and the incongruity of her present position among lives which had had many of Nature's beauties stamped out of them, and few of the beauties of Art stamped in, brought



ROUND HER, LEANING AGAINST BRANCHES, OR PROSTRATE ON THE GROUND, WERE TWO OR THREE INDIVIDUALS.

him, as a second feeling, a pride in her that almost equalled his first sentiment of surprise. Christopher's attention was meanwhile attracted from the constitution of the group to the words of the speaker in the centre of it—words to which her auditors were listening with still attention.

It appeared to Christopher that Ethelberta had lately been undergoing some very extraordinary experiences. What the beginning of them had been he could not in the least understand, but the portion she was describing came distinctly to his ears, and he wondered more and more.

‘Nobody came near me for an hour or two,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I began to think, as one naturally would, that he must have gone from the rock, and left me to pass the night upon it—perhaps to starve there, for the cliffs of the opposite shore were bare of men, houses, animals, or trees. Where were now, I thought, the gallant men who would have laid down life and soul for me but three short hours before?’

‘As the evening drew on it came into my mind that I had asked my antagonist what part of the coast we had been landed upon by our mutual enemies. “The east,” he had said. I could not contradict him; but it was only necessary to glance towards the setting sun, now pouring its red blaze across the water like a newly-opened furnace, to see how completely I had been misinformed.

‘However, I was mistaken in supposing myself to be left alone. He was as hopelessly imprisoned as I. I had been sitting in the remoter part of the green level space which covered the top of the rock. The sun had gone down some time since, the night had come on, a cold sea fog was blowing upon my face, and the monotonous wash of the waves beneath was lulling my ears. Somebody rose above the line of the slope, and came near me. The gloom was by this time too profound for me to see anything distinctly, but I immediately guessed that this was he, since he would naturally wait for night, his blindness ceasing to be so great a drawback when the lateness of the hour had brought the same defect upon myself. It evidently had crossed his mind that I might take advantage of his sightless state to give him a sudden push over the cliff, in spite of his great strength, as long as I possessed one extra sense; in the dark our senses were equal.

‘I cannot tell why, but at that moment the affliction of my enemy rendered him still more terrible to me. We were both in darkness, for the fog enveloped us like a pall; but he had the enormous advantage of being used to darkness, whilst to me it was strange and hampering.

‘He came forward till he, like myself, was about twenty yards from the edge. I instinctively grasped my useless stiletto. How I longed for the assistance

which a little earlier I had so much despised ! Reaching the block or boulder upon which I had been sitting, he clasped his arms around from behind ; his hands closed upon the empty seat, and he jumped up with an oath. This method of attack told me a new thing with wretched distinctness ; he had, as I supposed, discovered my sex ; male attire was to serve my turn no longer. The next instant, indeed, made it clear, for he exclaimed, " You don't escape me, masquerading madam," or some such words, and came on. My only hope was that in his excitement he might forget to notice where the grass terminated near the edge of the plateau, though this could be easily felt by a careful walker : to make my own feeling more distinct on this point I hastily bared my feet.'

The listeners moistened their lips, Ethelberta took breath, and then went on to describe the scene that ensued, ' A dreadful variation on the game of Blind-man's buff,' being the words by which she characterised it.

Ethelberta's manner had become so impassioned at this point that the lips of her audience parted, the children clung to their elders, and Christopher could control himself no longer. He thrust aside the boughs, and broke in upon the group.

' For Heaven's sake, Ethelberta,' he exclaimed with great excitement, ' where did you meet with such a terrible experience as that?'

The children shrieked, as if they thought that the interruption was in some way the catastrophe of the events in course of narration. Everyone started up; the two young mechanics stared, and one of them enquired, in return, 'What's the matter, friend?'

Christopher had not yet made reply when Ethelberta stepped from her pedestal down upon the crackling carpet of deep leaves.

'Mr. Julian!' said she, in a serene voice, turning upon him eyes of such a disputable stage of colour, between brown and grey, as would have commended itself to a gallant duellist of the last century as 'a point on which it was absolutely necessary to take some friend's life or other. But the calmness was artificially done, and the astonishment that did not appear in Ethelberta's tones was expressed by her gaze. Christopher was not in a mood to draw fine distinctions between recognised and unrecognised organs of speech. He replied to the eyes.

'I own that your surprise is natural,' he said, with an anxious look into her face, as if he wished to get beyond this interpolated scene to something more congenial and understood. 'But my concern at such a history of yourself since I last saw you is even more natural than your surprise at my manner of breaking in.'

'That history would justify any conduct in one who hears it——'

‘Yes, indeed.’

‘If it were true,’ added Ethelberta, smiling. ‘But it is as false as——’ She could name nothing inherently or notoriously false without raising an image of what was disagreeable, and she continued in a better manner: ‘The story I was telling is entirely a fiction, which I am getting up for a particular purpose—very different from what appears at present.’

‘I am sorry there was such a misunderstanding,’ Christopher stammered, looking upon the ground uncertain and ashamed. ‘Yet I am not, either, for I am very glad you have not undergone such trials, of course. But the fact is I—being in the neighbourhood—I ventured to call on a matter of business, relating to a poem which I had the pleasure of setting to music at the beginning of the year.’

Ethelberta was only a little less ill at ease than Christopher showed himself to be by this way of talking.

‘Will you walk slowly on?’ she said gently to the two young men, ‘and take the children with you; this gentleman wishes to speak to me on business.’

The biggest young man caught up a little one under his arm, and plunged amid the boughs; another little one lingered behind for a few moments to look shyly at Christopher, with an oblique manner of hiding her mouth against her shoulder and her eyes behind her pinafore. Then she vanished, the boy and the

second young man followed, and Ethelberta and Christopher stood within the wood-bound circle alone.

‘I hope I have caused no inconvenience by interrupting the proceedings,’ said Christopher, softly; ‘but I so very much wished to see you—so very much!’

‘Did you, indeed—really wish to see me?’ she said, gladly. ‘Never mind inconvenience then; it is a word which seems shallow in meaning under the circumstances. I surely must say that a visit is to my advantage, must I not? I am not as I was, you see, and may receive as advantages what I used to consider as troubles.’

‘Has your life really changed so much?’

‘It has changed. But what I first meant was that an interesting visitor at a wrong time is better than a stupid one at a right time.’

‘I had been behind the trees for some minutes, looking at you, and thinking of you; but what you were doing rather interrupted my first meditation. I had thought of a meeting in which we should continue our intercourse at the point at which it was broken off years ago, as if the omitted part had not existed at all; but something, I cannot tell what, has upset all that feeling, and——’

‘I can soon tell you the meaning of my extraordinary performance,’ Ethelberta broke in quickly, and with a little trepidation. ‘My mother-in-law, Lady Petherwin, is dead; and she has left me nothing but

her house and furniture in London—more than I deserve, but less than she had distinctly led me to expect ; and so I am somewhat in a corner.’

‘It is always so.’

‘Not always, I think. But this is how it happened. Lady Petherwin was very capricious ; when she was not foolishly kind she was unjustly harsh. A great many are like it, never thinking what a good thing it would be, instead of going on tacking from side to side between favour and cruelty, to keep to a mean line of common justice. And so we quarrelled, and she, being absolute mistress of all her wealth, destroyed her will that was in my favour, and made another, leaving me nothing but the rag-end of the lease of the town-house and the furniture in it. Then, when we were abroad, she turned to me again, forgave everything, and, becoming ill afterwards, wrote a letter to the brother, to whom she had left the bulk of her property, stating that I was to have 20,000*l.* of the 100,000*l.* she had bequeathed to him—as in the original will—doing this by letter in case anything should happen to her before a new will could be considered, drawn, and signed, and trusting to his honour quite that he would obey her expressed wish should she die abroad. Well, she did die, in the full persuasion that I was provided for ; but her brother (as I secretly expected all the time) refused to be morally bound by a document which had no legal value, and the result is that he has every-

thing, except, of course, the furniture and the lease. It would have been enough to break the heart of a person who had calculated upon getting a fortune, which I never did; for I felt always like an intruder and a bondswoman, and had wished myself out of the Petherwin family a hundred times, with my crust of bread and liberty. For one thing, I was always forbidden to see my relatives, and it pained me much. Now I am going to move for myself, and consider that I have a good chance of success in what I may undertake, because of an indifference I feel about succeeding which gives the necessary coolness that any great task requires.'

'I presume you mean to write more poems?'

'I cannot—that is, I can write no more that satisfy me. To blossom into rhyme on the sparkling pleasures of life, you must be under the influence of those pleasures, and I am at present quite removed from them—surrounded by gaunt realities of a very different description.'

'Then try the mournful. Trade upon your sufferings: many do, and thrive.'

'It is no use to say that—no use at all. I cannot write a line of verse. And yet the others flowed from my heart like a stream! But nothing is so easy as to seem clever when you have money.'

'Except to seem stupid when you have none,' said Christopher, looking at the dead leaves.

Ethelberta allowed herself to linger on that thought

for a few seconds; and continued, 'Then the question arose, what was I to do? I felt that to write prose would be an uncongenial occupation, and altogether a poor prospect for a woman like me. Finally I have decided to appear in public.'

'Not on the stage?'

'Certainly not on the stage. There is no novelty in a poor lady turning actress, and novelty is what I want. Ordinary powers exhibited in a new way effect as much as extraordinary powers exhibited in an old way.'

'Yes—so they do. And extraordinary powers, and a new way too, would be irresistible.'

'I don't calculate upon both. I had written a prose story by request, when it was found that I had grown utterly inane over verse. It was written in the first person, and the style was modelled after Defoe's. The night before sending it off, when I had already packed it up, I was reading about the professional storytellers of Eastern countries, who devoted their lives to the telling of tales. I unfastened the manuscript and retained it, convinced that I should do better by *telling* the story.'

'Well thought of!' exclaimed Christopher, looking into her face. 'There is a way for everybody to live, if they can only find it out.'

'It occurred to me,' she continued, blushing slightly, 'that tales of the weird kind were made to be told, not

written. The action of a teller is wanted to give due effect to all stories of incident ; and I hope that a time will come when, as of old, instead of an unsocial reading of fiction at home alone, people will meet together cordially, and sit at the feet of a professed romancer. I am going to tell my tales before a London public. As a child, I had a considerable power in arresting the attention of other children by recounting adventures which had never happened ; and men and women are but children enlarged a little. Look at this.'

She drew from her pocket a folded paper, shook it abroad, and disclosed a rough draft of an announcement to the effect that Mrs. Petherwin, Professed Story-teller, would devote an evening to that ancient form of the romancer's art, at a well-known fashionable hall in London. 'Now you see,' she continued, 'the meaning of what you observed going on here. That you heard was one of three tales I am preparing, with a view of selecting the best. As a reserved one, I have the tale of my own life—to be played as a last card. It was a private rehearsal before my brothers and sisters—not with any view of obtaining their criticism, but that I might become accustomed to my own voice in the presence of listeners.'

'If I only had had half your enterprise, what I might have done in the world !'

'Now did you ever consider what a power Defoe's manner would have if practised by word of mouth ?'

Indeed, it is a style which suits itself infinitely better to telling than to writing, abounding as it does in colloquialisms that are somewhat out of place on paper in these days, but have a wonderful power in making a narrative seem real. And so, in short, I am going to talk Defoe on a subject of my own. Well?’

The last word had been given tenderly, with a long-drawn sweetness, and was caused by a look that Christopher was bending upon her at the moment, in which he revealed that he was thinking less of the subject she was so eagerly and hopefully descanting upon than upon her aspect in explaining it. It is a fault of manner particularly common among men newly imported into the society of bright and beautiful women; and we will hope that, springing as it does from no unworthy source, it is as soon forgiven in the general world as it was here.

‘I was only following a thought,’ said Christopher:—‘a thought of how I used to know you, and then lost sight of you, and then discovered you famous, and how we are here under these sad autumn trees, and nobody in sight.’

‘I think it must be tea-time,’ she said, suddenly. ‘Tea is a great meal with us here—you will join us, will you not?’ And Ethelberta began to make for herself a passage through the boughs. Another rustle was heard a little way off, and one of the children appeared.

‘ Emmeline wants to know, please, if the gentleman that come to see ye will stay to tea; because, if so, she’s a going to put in another spoonful for him and a bit of best green.’

‘ Oh, Georgina—how candid! Yes, put in some best green.’

Before Christopher could say any more to her, they were emerging by the corner of the cottage, and one of the brothers drew near them. ‘ Mr. Julian, you’ll bide and have a cup of tea wi’ us?’ he enquired of Christopher. ‘ A old friend of yours, is he not, Mrs. Petherwin?’ [Christopher wondered at the epithet.] ‘ Dan and I be going back to Sandbourne to-night, and we can walk with ye as far as the station.’

‘ I shall be delighted,’ said Christopher; and they all entered the cottage. The evening had grown clearer by this time; the sun was peeping out just previous to departure, and sent gold wires of light across the glades and into the windows, throwing a pattern of the diamond quarries, and outlines of the geraniums in pots, against the opposite wall. One end of the room was polygonal, such a shape being dictated by the exterior design; in this part the windows were placed, as at the east end of continental churches. Thus, from the combined effects of the ecclesiastical lancet lights and the apsidal shape of the room, it occurred to Christopher that the sisters were all a delightful set of pretty saints, exhibiting themselves in a lady-chapel,

and backed up by unkempt major prophets, as represented by the forms of their big brothers.

Christopher sat down to tea as invited, squeezing himself in between two children whose names were almost as long as their persons, and whose tin cups discoursed primitive music by means of spoons rattled inside them until they were filled. The tea proceeded pleasantly, notwithstanding that the cake, being a little burnt, tasted on the outside like the latter plums in snapdragon. Christopher never could meet the eye of Picotee, who continued in a wild state of flushing all the time, fixing her looks upon the sugar-basin, except when she glanced out of the window to see how the evening was going on, and speaking no word at all unless it was to correct a small sister of somewhat crude manners as regards filling the mouth, which Picotee did in a whisper, and a gentle inclination of her mouth to the little one's ear, and a still deeper blush than before.

Their visitor next noticed that an additional cup-and-saucer and plate made their appearance occasionally at the table, were silently replenished, and then carried off by one of the children to an inner apartment.

'Our mother is bedridden,' said Ethelberta, noticing Christopher's look at the proceeding. 'Emmeline attends to the household, except when Picotee is at home, and Joey attends to the gate; but our mother's afflic-

tion is a very unfortunate thing for the poor children. We are thinking of a plan of living which will, I hope, be more convenient than this is; but we have not yet decided what to do.'

At this minute a carriage and pair of horses became visible through one of the angular windows of the apse, in the act of turning in from the highway towards the park gate. The boy who answered to the name of Joey sprang up from the table with the promptness of a Jack-in-the-box, and ran out at the door. Everybody turned as the carriage passed through the gate, which Joey held open, putting his other hand where the brim of his hat would have been if he had worn one, and lapsing into a careless boy again the instant that the vehicle had gone by.

'There's a tremendous large dinner-party at the House to-night,' said Emmeline, methodically, looking at the equipage over the edge of her teacup, without leaving off sipping. 'That was Lord Mountclere. He's a wicked old man, they say.'

'Lord Mountclere?' said Ethelberta, musingly. 'I used to know some friends of his. In what way is he wicked?'

'I don't know,' said Emmeline, with simplicity. 'I suppose it is because he breaks the commandments. But I wonder how a big rich lord can want to steal anything.' Emmeline's thoughts of breaking commandments instinctively fell upon the eighth, as being in her

ideas the only case wherein the game could be considered as at all worth the candle.

Ethelberta said nothing; but Christopher thought that a shade of depression passed over her.

‘Hook back the gate, Joey,’ shouted Emmeline, when the carriage had proceeded up the drive. ‘There’s more to come.’

Joey did as ordered, and by the time he got indoors another carriage turned in from the public road—a one-horse brougham this time.

‘I know who that is: that’s Mr. Ladywell,’ said Emmeline, in the same matter-of-fact tone. ‘He’s been here afore: he’s a distant relation of the squire’s, and he once gave me sixpence for picking up his gloves.’

‘What shall I live to see?’ murmured the poetess, under her breath, nearly dropping her teacup in an involuntary trepidation, from which she made it a point of dignity to recover in a moment. Christopher’s eyes, at the mention of his rival’s name, followed by that exhibition from Ethelberta, entered her own like a pair of lances. Picotee, seeing Christopher’s quick look of jealousy, became involved in her turn, and grew pale as a lily in her endeavours to conceal the complications to which it gave birth in her poor little breast likewise.

‘You judge me very wrongly,’ said Ethelberta, in answer to Christopher’s hasty look of resentment.

‘In supposing Mr. Ladywell to be a great friend of

yours?' said Christopher, who had in some indescribable way suddenly assumed a right to Ethelberta as his old property.

'Yes: for I hardly know him, and certainly do not value him.'

After this there was something in the mutual look of the two, though their words had been private, which did not tend to remove the anguish of fragile Picotee. Christopher, assured that Ethelberta's embarrassment had been caused by nothing more than the sense of her odd social subsidence, recovered more bliss than he had lost, and regarded calmly the profile of young Ladywell between the two windows of his brougham as it passed the open cottage door, bearing him along unconscious as the dead of the nearness of his beloved one, and of the sad buffoonery that fate, fortune, and the guardian angels had been playing with Ethelberta of late.

'Perhaps you remember seeing him at the Christmas dance at Wyndway?' she enquired. 'He is a good-natured fellow. Afterwards he sent me that portfolio of sketches you see in the corner. He might possibly do something in the world as a painter if he were obliged to work at the art for his bread, which he is not.' She added, with bitter pleasantry: 'In bare mercy to his self-respect, I must remain unseen here.'

It impressed Christopher to perceive how, under

the estrangement which arose from differences of education, surroundings, experience, and talent, the sympathies of close relationship were perceptible in Ethelberta's bearing towards her brothers and sisters. At a remark upon some simple pleasure wherein she had not participated because absent and occupied by far more comprehensive interests, a gloom as of banishment would cross her face and dim it for awhile, showing that the free habits and enthusiasms of country life had still their charm with her; in the face of the subtler gratifications of abridged bodices, candlelight, and no feelings in particular, which prevailed in town. Perhaps the one condition which could work up into a permanent feeling the passing revival of his fancy for a woman whose chief attribute he had supposed to be sprightliness was added now by the romantic ubiquity of station that attached to her. A discovery which might have grated on the senses of a man wedded to conventionality was a positive pleasure to one whose faith in society had departed with his own social ruin.

The room began to darken, whereupon Christopher arose to leave; and the brothers Sol and Dan offered to accompany him.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TURNPIKE ROAD.

‘WE be thinking of coming to London ourselves soon,’ said Sol, a carpenter and joiner by trade, as he walked along at Christopher’s left hand. ‘There’s so much more chance for a man up the country. Now, if you was me, how should you set about getting a job, Sir?’

‘What can you do?’ said Christopher.

‘Well, I am a very good staircase hand; and I have been called neat at sash-frames; and I can knock together doors and shutters very well; and I can do a little at the cabinet-making. I don’t mind framing a roof, neither, if the rest be busy; and I am always ready to fill up my time at planing floor-boards by the foot.’

‘And I can mix and lay flat tints,’ said Dan, who was a house-painter, ‘and pick out mouldings, and grain in every kind of wood you can mention—oak, maple, walnut, satin-wood, cherry-tree——’

‘You can both do too much to stand the least chance of being allowed to do anything in a city, where limitation is all the rule in labour. To have any success,

Sol, you must be a man who can thoroughly look at a door to see what ought to be done to it, but as to looking at a window, that's not your line; or a person who, to the remotest particular, understands turning a screw, but who does not profess any knowledge of how to drive a nail. Dan must know how to paint blue to a marvel, but must be quite in the dark about painting green." If you stick to some such principle of specialty as this, you may get employment in London.'

'Ha-ha-ha!' said Dan, striking at a stone in the road with the stout green hazel he carried. 'A wink is as good as a nod: thank'ee—we'll mind all that now.'

'If we do come,' said Sol, 'we shall not mix up with Mrs. Petherwin at all.'

'Oh, indeed!'

'Oh, no. (Perhaps you think it odd that we call her "Mrs. Petherwin," but that's by agreement as safer and better than Berta, because we be such rough chaps you see, and she's so lofty.) 'Twould demean her to claim kin wi' her in London—two journeymen like we, that know nothing besides our trades.'

'Not at all,' said Christopher, by way of chiming in in the friendliest manner. 'She would be pleased to see any straightforward honest man and brother, I should think, notwithstanding that she has moved in other society for a time.'

‘Ah, you don’t know Berta!’ said Dan, looking as if he did.

‘How—in what way do you mean?’ said Christopher uneasily.

‘So lofty—so very lofty! Isn’t she, Sol? Why she’ll never stir out from mother’s till after dark, and then her day begins; and she’ll traipse about under the trees, and never go into the high road, so that nobody in the way of gentlepeople shall run up against her and know her living in such a little small hut after biding in a big mansion-place. There, we don’t find fault wi’ her about it: we like her just the same, though she don’t speak to us in the street; for a feller must be a fool to make a piece of work about a woman’s pride, when ’tis his own sister, and hang upon her and bother her when he knows ’tis for her good that he should not. Yes, her life has been quare enough. I hope she enjoys it, but for my part I like plain sailing. None of your ups and downs for me. There, I suppose ’twas her nater to want to look into the world a bit.’

‘Father and mother kept Berta to school, you understand, sir,’ explained the more thoughtful Sol, ‘because she was such a quick child, and they always had a notion of making a governess of her. Sums? If you said to that child, “Berta, ’leven-pence-three-farthings a day, how much a year?” she would tell’ee in three seconds out of her own little head. And that

hard sum about the herrings she had done afore she was nine.'

'True, she had,' said Dan. 'And we all know that to do that is to do something that's no nonsense.'

'What is the sum?' Christopher enquired.

'What—not know the sum about the herrings?' said Dan, spreading his gaze all over Christopher in amazement.

'Never heard of it,' said Christopher.

'Why down in these parts, just as you try a man's soul by the Ten Commandments, you try his head by that there sum—hey, Sol?'

'Ay, that we do.'

'A herring and half for three-half-pence, how many can ye get for 'levenpence: that's the feller; and a mortel teaser he is, I assure 'ee. Our parson, who's not altogether without sense o' week days, said one afternoon, "If cunning can be found in the multiplication table at all, Chickerel, 'tis in connection with that sum." Well, Berta was so clever in arithmetic that she was asked to teach summing at Miss Courtley's, and there she got to like foreign tongues more than ciphering, and at last she hated ciphering, and took to books entirely. Mother and we were very proud of her at that time: not that we be stuck-up people at all—be we, Sol?'

'Not at all; nobody can say that we be that, though there's more of it in the country than there should be by all account.'

‘ You’d be surprised to see how vain the girls about here be getting. Little rascals, why they won’t curtsèy to the loftiest lady in the land ; no, not if you were to pay ’em to do it. Now, the men be different. Any man will touch his hat for a pint of beer. But then, of course, there’s some difference between the two. Touching your hat is a good deal less to do than bending your knees, as Berta used to say, when she was blowed up for not doing it. She was always one of the independent sort—you never seed such a maid as she was ! Now, Picotee was quite the other way.’

‘ Has Picotee left Sandbourne entirely ? ’

‘ Oh no ; she is home for the holidays. Well, Mr. Julian, our road parts from yours just here, unless you walk into the next town along with us. But I suppose you get across to this station, and go by rail ? ’

‘ I am obliged to go that way for my portmanteau,’ said Christopher, ‘ or I should have been pleased to walk further. Shall I see you in Sandbourne to-morrow ? I hope so.’

‘ Well, no. ’Tis hardly likely that you will see us—hardly. We know how unpleasant it is for a high sort of man to have rough chaps like us hailing him, so we think it best not to meet you—thank you all the same. So if you should run up against us in the street, we should be just as well pleased by your taking no notice, if you wouldn’t mind. ’Twill save so much awkwardness—being in our working clothes. ’Tis always the plan

that Mrs. Petherwin and we agree to act upon, and we find it best for both. I hope you take our meaning right, and as no offence, Mr. Julian.'

'And do you do the same with Picotee?'

'Oh Lord, no—'tisn't a bit of use to try. That's the worst of Picotee—there's no getting rid of her. The more in the rough we be the more she'll stick to us; and if we say she shan't come, she'll bide and fret about it till we be forced to let her.'

Christopher laughed, and promised, on condition that they would retract the statement about their not being proud; and then he wished his friends Good-night.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN INNER ROOM AT THE LODGE.

At the lodge at this time a discussion of some importance was in progress. The scene was Mrs. Chickereel's bedroom, to which, unfortunately, she was confined by some spinal complaint; and here she now appeared as an interesting-faced woman of five-and-forty, properly dressed as far as visible, and propped up in a bed covered with a quilt which presented a field of little squares in many tints, looking altogether like a bird's-eye view of a market garden.

Mrs. Chickereel had been nurse in a nobleman's family until her marriage, and after that she played the part of wife and mother upon the whole affectionately and well. Among her minor differences with her husband had been one about the naming of the children; a matter that was at last compromised by an agreement under which the choice of the girls' names became her prerogative, and that of the boys' her husband's, who limited his field of selection to strict historical precedent as a set-off to Mrs. Chickereel's tendency to stray into the regions of romance.

The only grown-up daughters at home, Ethelberta and Picotee, with their brother Joey, were sitting near her; the two youngest children, Georgina and Myrtle, who had been strutting in and out of the room, and otherwise endeavouring to walk, talk, and speak like the gentleman just gone away, were packed off to bed. Emmeline, of that transitional age which causes its exponent to look wistfully at the sitters when romping and at the rompers when sitting, uncertain whether her position in the household is that of child or woman, was idling in a corner. The two absent brothers and two absent sisters—eldest members of the family—completed the round ten whom Mrs. Chickereel with thoughtless readiness had presented to a crowded world, to cost Ethelberta many wakeful hours at night while she revolved schemes how they might be decently maintained.

‘I still think,’ Ethelberta was saying, ‘that the plan I first proposed is the best. I am convinced that it will not do to attempt to keep on the Lodge. If we are all together in town, I can look after you much better than when you are far away from me down here.’

‘Shall we not interfere with you—your plans for keeping up your connections?’ enquired her mother, glancing up towards Ethelberta by lifting the flesh of her forehead, instead of troubling to raise her face altogether.

‘Not nearly so much as by staying here.’

‘But,’ said Picotee, ‘if you let lodgings, won’t the gentlemen and ladies know it?’

‘I have thought of that,’ said Ethelberta, ‘and this is how I shall manage. In the first place, if mother is there, the lodgings can be let in her name, all bills will be receipted by her, and all tradesmen’s orders will be given as from herself. Then, we will take no English lodgers at all; we will advertise the rooms only in Continental newspapers, as suitable for a French or German gentleman or two, and by this means there will be little danger of my acquaintance discovering that my house is not entirely a private one, or of any lodger being a friend of my acquaintance. I have thought over every possible way of combining the dignified social position I must maintain to make my story-telling attractive with my absolute lack of money, and I can see no better one.’

‘Then if Gwendoline is to be your cook, she must soon give notice at her present place?’

‘Yes. Everything depends upon Gwendoline and Cornelia. But there is time enough for them to give notice—Christmas will be soon enough. If they cannot, or will not come as cook and housemaid, I am afraid the plan will break down. A vital condition is that I do not have a soul in the house (beyond the lodgers) who is not one of my own relations. When we have

put Joey into buttons, he will do very well to attend to the door.'

'But s'pose,' said Joey, after a glassy look at his future appearance in the position alluded to, 'that any of your gentlepeople come to see ye, and when I opens the door and lets 'em in a swinging big lodger stalks downstairs. What will 'em think? Up will go their eyeglasses at one another till they glares each other into holes. My gracious!'

'The one who calls will only think that another visitor is leaving, Joey. But I shall have no visitors, or very few. I shall let it be well known among my late friends that my mother is an invalid, and that on this account we receive none but the most intimate friends. These intimate friends not existing, we receive nobody at all.'

'Except Sol and Dan, if they get a job in London? They'll have to call upon us at the back door, won't they, Berta?' said Joey.

'They must go down the area steps. But they will not mind that; they like the idea.'

'And father, too, must he go down the steps?'

'He may come whichever way he likes. He will be glad enough to have us near at any price. I know that he is not at all happy at leaving you down here, and he away in London. You remember that he has only taken the situation at Mr. Doncastle's on the supposition that you all come to town as soon as he

can see an opening for getting you there; and as nothing of the sort has offered itself to him, this will be the very thing. Of course, if I succeed wonderfully well in my schemes for story-tellings, readings of my ballads and poems, lectures on the art of versification, and what not, we need have no lodgers; and then we shall all be living a happy family—all taking our share in keeping the establishment going.'

'Except poor me!' sighed the mother.

'My dear mother, you will be necessary as a steady-ing power—a flywheel, in short, to the concern. I wish that father could live there, too.'

'He'll never give up his present way of life—it has grown to be a part of his nature. Poor man, he never feels at home except in somebody else's house, and is nervous and quite a stranger in his own. Such is the fatal effects of service!'

'Oh mother, don't!' said Ethelberta tenderly, but with her teeth on edge; and Picotee curled up her toes, fearing that her mother was going to moralise.

'Well, what I mean is, that your father would not like to live upon your earnings, and so forth. But in town we shall be near him—that's one comfort, certainly.'

'And I shall not be wanted at all,' said Picotee, in a melancholy tone.

'It is much better to stay where you are,' her

mother said. 'You will come and spend the holidays with us, of course, as you do now.'

'I should like to live in London best,' murmured Picotee, her head sinking mournfully to one side. 'I *hate* being in Sandbourne now!'

'Nonsense!' said Ethelberta, severely. 'We are all contriving how to live most comfortably, and it is by far the best thing for you to stay at the school. You used to be happy enough there.'

Picotee sighed, and said no more.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LARGE PUBLIC HALL.

It was the second week in February, Parliament had just met, and Ethelberta appeared for the first time before an audience in London.

There was some novelty in the species of entertainment that the active young woman had proposed to herself, and this doubtless had due effect in collecting the body of strangers that greeted her entry, over and above those friends who came to listen to her as a matter of course. Men and women who had become totally indifferent to new actresses, new readers, and new singers, once more felt the freshness of curiosity as they considered the promise of the announcement. But the chief inducement to attend lay in the fact that here was to be seen in the flesh a woman with whom the tongue of rumour had been busy in many romantic ways—a woman who, whatever else might be doubted, had certainly produced a volume of verse which had been the talk of the many who had read them, and of the many more who had not, for several consecutive weeks.

What was her story to be? Persons interested in the enquiry—a small proportion, it may be owned, of the whole London public, and chiefly young men—answered this question for themselves by assuming that it would take the form of some pungent and gratifying revelation of the innermost events of her own life, from which her gushing lines had sprung as an inevitable consequence, and which being once known, would cause such musical poesy to appear no longer wonderful.

The front part of the room was well filled, rows of listeners showing themselves like a drilled-in crop of which not a seed has failed. They were listeners of the right sort, a majority having noses of the prominent and dignified type, which when viewed in oblique perspective ranged as regularly as bow-windows at a watering place. Ethelberta's plan was to tell her pretended history and adventures while sitting in a chair—as if she were at her own fireside, surrounded by a circle of friends. By this touch of domesticity a great appearance of truth and naturalness was given, though really the attitude was at first more difficult to maintain satisfactorily than any one wherein stricter formality should be observed. She gently began her subject, as if scarcely knowing whether a throng were near her or not, and, in her fear of seeming artificial, spoke too low. This defect, however, she soon corrected, and ultimately went on in a charmingly colloquial manner. What Ethelberta relied upon soon

became evident. It was not upon the intrinsic merits of her story as a piece of construction, but upon her method of telling it. Whatever defects the tale possessed—and they were not a few—it had, as delivered by her, the one pre-eminent merit of seeming like truth. A modern critic has well observed of Defoe that he had the most amazing talent on record for telling lies; and Ethelberta, in wishing her fiction to appear like a real narrative of personal adventure, did wisely to make Defoe her model. His is a style even better adapted for speaking than for writing, and the peculiarities of diction which he adopts to give verisimilitude to his narratives acquired enormous additional force when exhibited as *vivâ-voce* mannerisms. And although these artifices were not, perhaps, slavishly copied from that master of delusion, they would undoubtedly have reminded her hearers of him, had they not mostly been drawn from an easeful section in society which is especially characterised by the mental condition of knowing nothing about any author a week after they have read him. The few there who did remember Defoe were impressed by a fancy that his words greeted them anew in a winged auricular form, instead of by the weaker channels of print and eyesight. The reader may imagine what an effect this well-studied method must have produced when intensified by a clear living voice, animated action, and the brilliant and expressive eye of a handsome woman—attributes which of them-

selves almost compelled belief. When she reached the most telling passages, instead of adding exaggerated action and sound, Ethelberta would lapse to a whisper and a sustained stillness, which were more striking than gesticulation. All that could be done by art was there, and if inspiration was wanting nobody missed it.

It was in performing this feat that Ethelberta seemed first to discover in herself the full power of that self-command which further onward in her career more and more impressed her as a singular possession, until at last she was tempted to make of it many fantastic uses, leading to results that affected more households than her own. A talent for demureness under difficulties without the cold-bloodedness which renders such a bearing natural and easy, a face and hand reigning unmoved outside a heart by nature turbulent as a wave, is a constitutional arrangement much to be desired by people in general; yet, had Ethelberta been framed with less of that gift in her, her life might have been more comfortable as an experience, and brighter as an example, though perhaps duller as a story.

‘Ladywell, how came this Mrs. Petherwin to think of such a queer trick as telling romances, after doing so well as a poet?’ said a man in the stalls to his friend, who had been gazing at the Story-teller with a rapt face.

‘What—don’t you know?—everybody did, I thought,’ said the painter.

‘A mistake. Indeed, I should not have come here at all had I not heard the subject mentioned by accident yesterday at Grey’s; and then I remembered her to be the same woman I had met at some place—Belmaine’s I think it was—last year, when I thought her just getting on for handsome and clever, not to put it too strongly.’

‘Ah! naturally you would not know much,’ replied Ladywell in an eager whisper. ‘Perhaps I am judging others by myself a little more than—but, as you have heard, she is an acquaintance of mine. I know her very well, and, in fact, I originally suggested the scheme to her as a pleasant way of adding to her fame. “Depend upon it, dear Mrs. Petherwin,” I said, during a pause in one of our dances together some time ago, “any public appearance of yours would be successful beyond description.”’

‘Oh, I had no idea that you knew her so well! Then it is quite through you that she has adopted this course?’

‘Well, not entirely—I could not say entirely. She said that some day, perhaps, she might do such a thing; and, in short, I reduced her vague ideas to form.’

‘I should not mind knowing her better—I must get you to throw us together in some way,’ said Neigh, with some interest. ‘I had no idea that you were such an old friend. You could do it, I suppose?’

‘Really, I am afraid—hah-hah—may not have the

opportunity of obliging you. I met her at Wyndway, you know, where she was visiting with Lady Petherwin. It was some time ago, and I cannot say that I have ever met her since.'

'Or before?' said Neigh.

'Well—no; I never did.'

'Ladywell, if I had half your power of going to your imagination for facts, I would be the greatest painter in England.'

'Now, Neigh—that's too bad—hah-hah—but with regard to this matter, I do speak with some interest,' said Ladywell, with a pleased sense of himself.

'In love with her?—Smitten down?—Done for?'

'Now, now! However, several other fellows chaff me about her. It was only yesterday that Jones said——'

'Do you know why she cares to do this sort of thing?'

'Merely a desire for fame, I suppose.'

'I should think she has fame enough already.'

'That I can express no opinion upon. I am thinking of getting her permission to use her face in a subject I am preparing. It is a fine face for canvas. Glorious contour—glorious. Ah, here she is again, for the second part.'

'Dream on, young fellow. You'll make a rare couple!' said Neigh with a flavour of superciliousness unheeded by his occupied companion.

Further back in the room were a pair of faces whose keen interest in the performance contrasted much with the languidly permissive air of those in front. When the ten-minutes' break occurred, Christopher was the first of the two to speak. 'Well, what do you think of her, Faith?' he said, shifting restlessly on his seat.

'I like the quiet parts of the tale best, I think,' replied the sister; 'but, of course, I am not a good judge of these things. How still the people are at times! I continually take my eyes from her to look at the listeners. Did you notice the fat old lady in the second row, with her cloak a little thrown back? She was absolutely unconscious, and stayed with her face up and lips parted like a little child of six.'

'She well may: the thing is a triumph. That fellow Ladywell is here, I believe—yes, it is he, busily talking to the man on his right. If I were a woman I would rather go donkey-driving than stick myself up there, for gaping fops to quiz and say what they like about! But she had no choice, poor thing; for it was that or nothing with her.'

Faith, who had secret doubts about the absolute necessity of Ethelberta's appearance in public, said, with remote meanings, 'Perhaps it is not altogether a severe punishment to her to be looked at by well-dressed men. Suppose she feels it as a blessing, instead of an affliction?'

‘She is a different sort of woman Faith, and so you would say if you knew her. Of course, it is natural for you to criticise her severely just now, and I don’t wish to defend her.’

‘I think you do a little, Kit.’

‘No; I am indifferent about it all. Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had never seen her; and possibly it might have been better for her if she had never seen me. She has a heart, and the heart is a troublesome encumbrance when great things have to be done. I wish you knew her: I am sure you would like each other.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Faith, in a voice of rather weak conviction. ‘But, as we live in such a plain way, it would be hardly desirable at present.’

Ethelberta being regarded, in common with the latest conjuror, spirit-medium, aëronaut, giant, dwarf, or monarch, as a new sensation, she was duly criticised in the morning papers, and even obtained a notice in some of the weekly reviews.

‘A handsome woman,’ said one of these, ‘may have her own reasons for causing the flesh of the London public to creep upon its bones by her undoubtedly remarkable narrative powers; but we question if much good can result from such a form of entertainment. Nevertheless, some praise is due. We have had the novel-writer among us for some time, and the novel-

reader has occasionally appeared on our platforms ; but we believe that this is the first instance on record of a Novel-teller—one, that is to say, who relates professedly as fiction a romantic tale which has never been printed—the whole owing its chief interest to the method whereby the teller identifies herself with the leading character in the story.’

Another observed : ‘ When once we get away from the magic influence of the story-teller’s eye and tongue, we perceive how improbable, even impossible, is the tissue of events to which we have been listening with so great a sense of reality, and we feel almost angry with ourselves at having been the victims of such utter illusion.’

‘ Mrs. Petherwin’s personal appearance is decidedly in her favour,’ said another. ‘ She affects no unconsciousness of the fact that form and feature are no mean vehicles of persuasion, and she uses the powers of each to the utmost. There spreads upon her face when in repose an air of innocence which is charmingly belied by the subtlety we discover beneath it when she begins her tale ; and this amusing discrepancy between her physical presentment and the inner woman is further illustrated by the misgiving, which seizes us on her entrance, that so impressionable a lady will never bear up in the face of so trying an audience. . . . The combinations of incident which Mrs. Petherwin persuades her hearers that she has passed through are not a little

marvellous; and if what is rumoured be true, that the tales are to a great extent based upon her own experiences, she has proved herself to be no less daring in adventure than facile in her power of describing it.'

CHAPTER XIX.

ÆTHELBERTA'S HOUSE.

AFTER such successes as these, Christopher could not forego the seductive intention of calling upon the poetess and romancer, at her now established town residence in Connaught Crescent. One wintry afternoon he reached the door—now for the third time—and gave a knock which had in it every tender refinement that could be thrown into the somewhat antagonistic vehicle of noise. Turning his face down the street he waited restlessly on the step. There was a strange light in the atmosphere: the glass of the street-lamps; the varnished back of a passing cab, a milk-woman's cans, and a row of church-windows glared in his eyes like new-rubbed copper; and on looking the other way he beheld a bloody sun hanging among the chimneys at the upper end, as a danger-lamp to warn him off.

By this time the door was opened, and before him stood Ethelberta's young brother Joey, thickly populated with little buttons, the remainder of him consisting of invisible green.

‘Ah, Joseph!’ said Christopher, instantly recogni-

sing the boy. 'What, are you here in office? Is your——'

Joey lifted his forefinger and spread his mouth in a genial manner, as if to signify particular friendliness mingled with general caution.

'Yes, sir, Mrs. Petherwin is my mistress. I'll see if she is at home, sir,' he replied, raising his shoulders and winking a wink of strategic meanings by way of finish—all which signs showed, if evidence were wanted, how effectually this pleasant young page understood, though quite fresh from Wessex, the duties of his peculiar position. Mr. Julian was shown to the drawing-room, and there he found Ethelberta alone.

She gave him a hand so cool and still that Christopher, much as he desired the contact, was literally ashamed to let her see and feel his own, trembling with unmanageable excess of feeling. It was always so, always had been so, always would be so, at these meetings of theirs: she was immeasurably the strongest; and the deep-eyed young man fancied, in the chagrin which the perception of this difference always bred in him, that she triumphed in her superior control. Yet it was only in little things that their sexes were thus reversed: Christopher would receive quite a shock if a little dog barked at his heels, and be totally unmoved when in danger of his life.

Certainly the most self-possessed woman in the world, under pressure of the incongruity between their

last meeting and the present one, might have shown more embarrassment than Ethelberta showed on greeting him to-day. Christopher was only a man in believing that the shyness which she did evince was chiefly the result of personal interest. She might or might not have been said to blush—perhaps the stealthy change upon her face was too slow an operation to deserve that name: but, though pale when he called, the end of ten minutes saw her colour high and wide. She soon set him at his ease, and seemed to relax a long-sustained tension as she talked to him of her arrangements, hopes, and fears.

‘And how do you like London society?’ said Ethelberta.

‘Pretty well, as far as I have seen it: to the surface of its front door.’

‘You will find nothing to be alarmed at if you get inside.’

‘Oh, no—of course not—except my own shortcomings,’ said the modest musician. ‘London society is made up of much more refined people than society anywhere else.’

‘That’s a very prevalent opinion; and it is nowhere half so prevalent as in London society itself. However, come and see my house—unless you think it a trouble to look over a house?’

‘No; I should like it very much.’

The decorations tended towards the artistic gymnastics prevalent in some quarters at the present day. Upon a general flat tint of duck's-egg green appeared quaint patterns of conventional foliage, and birds, done in bright auburn, several shades nearer to redbreasted than was Ethelberta's hair, which was thus thrust further towards brown by such juxtaposition—a possible reason for the choice of tint. Upon the glazed tiles within the chimney-piece were the forms of owls, bats, snakes, frogs, mice, spiders in their webs, moles, and other objects of aversion and darkness, shaped in black and burnt in after the approved fashion.

‘My brothers Sol and Dan did most of the actual work,’ said Ethelberta, ‘though I drew the outlines, and designed the tiles round the fire. The flowers, mice, and spiders are done very simply, you know: you only press a real flower, mouse, or spider out flat under a piece of glass, and then copy it, adding a little more emaciation and angularity at pleasure.’

‘In that “at pleasure” is where all the art lies,’ said he.

‘Well, yes—that is the case,’ said Ethelberta, thoughtfully; and, preceding him upstairs, she threw open a door on one of the floors, disclosing Dan in person, engaged upon a similar treatment of this floor also. Sol appeared bulging from the door of a closet, a little further on, where he was fixing some shelves;

and both wore workmen's blouses. At once coming down from the short ladder he was standing upon, Dan shook Christopher's hand with some velocity.

'We do a little at a time, you see,' he said, 'because Colonel down below, and Mrs. Petherwin's visitors, sha'n't smell the turpentine.'

'We be pushing on to-day to get it out of the way,' said Sol, also coming forward and greeting their visitor, but more reluctantly than his brother had done. 'Now I'll tell ye what—you two,' he added, after an uneasy pause, turning from Christopher to Ethelberta and back again in great earnestness: 'you'd better not bide here, talking to we rough ones, you know, for folks might find out that there's something closer between us than workmen and employer and employer's friend. So Berta and Mr. Julian, if you'll go on and take no more notice o' us, in case of visitors, it would be wiser—else, perhaps, if we should be found out intimate with ye, and bring down your gentility, you'll blame us for it. I get as nervous as a cat when I think I may be the cause of any disgrace to ye.'

'Don't be so silly, Sol,' said Ethelberta, laughing.

'Ah, that's all very well,' said Sol with an unbelieving smile; 'but if we baint company for you out of doors, you baint company for we within—not that I find fault with ye or mind it, and shan't take anything for painting your house, nor will Dan neither, any more for that—no, not a penny; in fact, we are glad to do

it for ye. At the same time, you keep to your class, and we'll keep to ours. And so, good afternoon, Berta, when you like to go, and the same to you, Mr. Julian. Dan, is that your mind ?'

'I can but own it,' said Dan.

The two brothers then turned their backs upon their visitors, and went on working, and Ethelberta and her lover left the room. 'My brothers, you perceive,' said she, 'represent the respectable British workman in his entirety, and a touchy individual he is, I assure you, on points of dignity, after imbibing a few town ideas from his leaders. They are painfully off-hand with me, absolutely refusing to be intimate, from a mistaken notion that I am ashamed of their dress and manners ; which, of course, is absurd.'

'Which, of course, is absurd,' said Christopher.

'Of course it is absurd !' she repeated with warmth, and looking keenly at him. But, finding no harm in his face, she continued as before : 'Yet, all the time, they will do anything under the sun that they think will advance my interests. In our hearts we are one. All they ask me to do is to leave them to themselves, and therefore I do so. Now, would you like to see some more of your acquaintance ?'

She introduced him to a large attic ; where he found himself in the society of two or three persons considerably below the middle height, whose manners were of that gushing kind sometimes called Continental,

their ages ranging from five years to eight. These were the youngest children, presided over by Emmeline, as professor of letters capital and small.

‘I am giving them the rudiments of education here,’ said Ethelberta; ‘but I foresee several difficulties in the way of keeping them here, which I must get over as best I can. One trouble is, that they don’t get enough air and exercise.’

‘Is Mrs. Chickereel living here as well?’ Christopher ventured to enquire, when they were downstairs again.

‘Yes; but confined to her room as usual, I regret to say. Two more sisters of mine, whom you have never seen at all, are also here. They are older than any of the rest of us, and had, broadly speaking, no education at all, poor girls. The eldest, Gwendoline, is my cook, and Cornelia is my housemaid. I suffer much sadness, and almost misery sometimes, in reflecting that here are we, ten brothers and sisters born of one father and mother, who might have mixed together and shared all in the same scenes, and been properly happy, if it were not for the strange accidents that have split us up into sections as you see, cutting me off from them without the compensation of joining me to any others. They are all true as steel in keeping the secret of our kin, certainly; but that brings little joy, though some satisfaction perhaps.’

‘You might be less despondent, I think. The tale-telling has been one of the successes of the season.’

‘ Yes, I might ; but I may observe that you scarcely set the example of blitheness.’

‘ Ah—that’s not because I don’t recognise the pleasure of being here. It is from a more general cause : simply an underfeeling I have that at the most propitious moment the distance to the possibility of sorrow is so short that a man’s spirits must not rise higher than mere cheerfulness out of bare respect to his insight.

As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.’

Ethelberta bowed uncertainly ; the remark might refer to her past conduct or it might not. ‘ My great cause of uneasiness is the children,’ she presently said, as a new page of matter. ‘ It is my duty, at all risk and all sacrifice of sentiment, to educate and provide for them. The grown-up ones, older than myself, I cannot help much, but the little ones I can. I keep my two French lodgers for the sake of them.’

‘ The lodgers, of course, don’t know the relationship between yourself and the rest of the people in the house?’

‘ O no !—nor will they ever. My mother is supposed to let the ground and first floors to me—a strange lady—as she does the second and third floors to them. Still, I may be discovered.’

‘ Well—if you are?’

‘Let me be. Life is a battle, they say ; but it is only so in the sense that a game of chess is a battle—there is no seriousness in it ; it may be put an end to at any inconvenient moment by owning yourself beaten, with a careless “Ha-ha !” and sweeping your pieces into the box. Experimentally, I care to succeed in society ; but at the bottom of my heart, I don’t care.’

‘For that very reason you are likely to do it. My idea is, make ambition your business and indifference your relaxation, and you will fail ; but make indifference your business and ambition your relaxation, and you will succeed. So impish are the ways of the gods.’

‘I hope that you at any rate will succeed,’ she said, at the end of a silence.

‘I never can—if success means getting what one wants.’

‘Why should you not get that ?’

‘It has been forbidden to me.’

Her complexion changed just enough to show that she knew what he meant. ‘If you were as bold as you are subtle, you would take a more cheerful view of the matter,’ she said, with a look signifying innermost things.

‘I will instantly ! Shall I test the truth of my cheerful view by a word of question ?’

‘I deny that you are capable of taking that view,

and until you prove that you are, no question is allowed,' she said, laughing, and still warmer in the face and neck. 'Nothing but melancholy, gentle melancholy, now as in old times when there was nothing to cause it.'

'Ah—you only tease.'

'You will not throw aside that bitter medicine of distrust, for the world. You have grown so used to it, that you take it as food, as some invalids do their mixtures.'

'Ethelberta, you have my heart—my whole heart. You have had it ever since I first saw you. Now you understand me, and no pretending that you don't, mind, this second time.'

'I understood you long ago; you have not understood me.'

'You are mysterious,' he said lightly; 'and perhaps if I disentangle your mystery I shall find it to cover—indifference. I hope it does—for your sake.'

'How can you say so!' she exclaimed reproachfully. 'Yet I wish it did too—I wish it did cover indifference—for yours. But you have all of me that you care to have, and may keep it for life if you wish to. Listen, surely there was a knock at the door? Let us go inside the room: I am always uneasy when anybody comes, lest any awkward discovery should be made by a visitor of my miserable contrivances for keeping up the establishment.'

Joey met them before they had left the landing.

‘Please, Berta,’ he whispered, ‘Mr. Ladywell has called, and I’ve showed him into the liberry. You know, Berta, this is how it was, you know : I thought you and Mr. Julian were in the drawing-room, and wouldn’t want him to see ye together, and so I asked him to step into the liberry a minute.’

‘You must improve your way of speaking,’ she said, with quick embarrassment, whether at the mention of Ladywell’s name before Julian, or at the way Joey coupled herself with Christopher, was quite uncertain. ‘Will you excuse me for a few moments?’ she said, turning to Christopher. ‘Pray sit down ; I shall not be long.’ And she glided downstairs.

They had been standing just by the drawing-room door, and Christopher turned back into the room with no very satisfactory countenance. It was very odd, he thought, that she should go down to Ladywell in that mysterious manner, when he might have been admitted to where they were talking without any trouble at all. What could Ladywell have to say, as an acquaintance calling upon her for a few minutes, that he was not to hear? Indeed, if it came to that, what right had Ladywell to call upon her at all, even though she were a widow, and to some extent chartered to live in a way which might be considered a trifle free if indulged in by other young women. This was the first time that he himself had ventured into her house on that very

account—a doubt whether it was quite proper to call, considering her youth, and the fertility of her position as ground for scandal. But no sooner did he arrive than here was Ladywell blundering in, and, since this conjunction had occurred on his first visit, the chances were that Ladywell came very often.

Julian walked up and down the room, every moment expanding itself to a minute in his impatience at the delay and vexation at the cause. After scrutinising for the fifth time every object on the walls as if afflicted with microscopic closeness of sight, his hands under his coat-tails, and his person jiggling up and down upon his toes, he heard her coming up the stairs. When she entered the apartment her appearance was decidedly that of a person subsiding after some little excitement.

‘I did not calculate upon being so long,’ she said sweetly, at the same time throwing back her face and smiling. ‘But I—was longer than I expected.’

‘It seemed rather long,’ said Christopher, gloomily; ‘but I don’t mind it.’

‘I am glad of that,’ said Ethelberta.

‘As you asked me to stay, I was very pleased to do so, and always should be; but I think that now I will wish you good-bye.’

‘You are not vexed with me?’ she said, looking quite into his face. ‘Mr. Ladywell is nobody, you know.’

‘Nobody?’

‘Well, he is not much, I mean. The case is, that I am sitting to him for a subject in which my face is to be used—otherwise than as a portrait—and he called about it.’

‘May I say,’ said Christopher, ‘that if you want yourself painted, you are ill-advised not to let it be done by a man who knows how to use the brush a little?’

‘Oh, he can paint!’ said Ethelberta, rather warmly. ‘His last picture was excellent, I think. It was greatly talked about.’

‘I imagined you to say that he was a mere nobody!’

‘Yes, but—how provoking you are!—nobody, I mean, to talk to. He is a true artist, nevertheless.’

Christopher made no reply. The warm understanding between them had quite ended now, and there was no fanning it up again. Sudden tiffs had been the constant misfortune of their courtship in days gone by, had been the remote cause of her marriage to another; and the familiar shadows seemed to be rising again to cloud them with the same persistency as ever. Christopher went downstairs with well-behaved moodiness, and left the house forthwith. The postman came to the door at the same time.

Ethelberta opened a letter from Picotee—now at Sandbourne again; and, stooping to the fire-light, she began to read:

‘My dear Ethelberta,—I have tried to like staying

at Sandbourne because you wished it, but I can't endure the town at all, dear Berta; everything is so wretched and dull! Oh, I only wish you knew how dismal it is here, and how much I would give to come to London! I cannot help thinking that I could do better in town. You see, I should be close to you, and should have the benefit of your experience. I would not mind what I did for a living could I be there where you all are. It is so like banishment to be here. If I could not get a pupil-teachership in some London school (and I believe I could by advertising) I could stay with you, and be governess to Georgina and Myrtle, for I am sure you cannot spare time enough to teach them as they ought to be taught, and Emmeline is not old enough to have any command over them. I could also assist at your dressmaking, and you must require a great deal of that to be done if you continue to appear in public. Mr. Long read in the papers the account of your first evening, and afterwards I heard two ladies of our committee talking about it; but of course not one of them knew my personal interest in the discussion. Now will you, Ethelberta, think if I may not come? Do, there's a dear sister! I will do anything you set me about if I may only come.

‘Your ever affectionate,

‘PICOTEE.’

‘Great powers above—what worries do beset me!’

cried Ethelberta, jumping up. ‘What can possess the child so suddenly?—she used to like Sandbourne well enough!’ She sat down, and hastily scribbled the following reply :

‘My dear Picotee,—There is only a little time to spare before the post goes, but I will try to answer your letter at once. Whatever is the reason of this extraordinary dislike to Sandbourne? It is a nice healthy place, and you are likely to do much better than either of our elder sisters if you follow straight on in the path you have chosen. Of course, if such good fortune should attend me that I get rich by my contrivances of public story-telling and so on, I shall share everything with you and the rest of us, in which case you shall not work at all. But (although I have been unexpectedly successful so far) this is problematical; and it would be rash to calculate upon all of us being able to live, or even us seven girls only, upon the fortune I am going to make that way. So, though I don’t mean to be harsh, I must impress upon you the necessity of going on as you are going just at present. I know the place must be dull, but we must all put up with dulness sometimes. You, being next to me in age, must aid me as well as you can in doing something for the younger ones; and if anybody at all comes and lives here otherwise than as a servant, it must be our father—who will not, however, at present

hear of such a thing when I mention it to him. Do think of all this, Picotee, and bear up! Perhaps we shall all be happy and united some day. Joey is waiting to run to the post-office with this at once. All are well. Sol and Dan have nearly finished the repairs and decorations of my house—but I will tell you of that another time.

‘ Your affectionate sister,

‘ BERTA.

CHAPTER XX.

NEAR SANDBOURNE—LONDON STREETS—ETHELBERTA'S.

WHEN this letter reached its destination the next morning, Picotee, in her over-anxiety, could not bring herself to read it in anybody's presence, and put it in her pocket till she was on her walk across the moor. She still lived at the cottage out of the town, though at some inconvenience to herself, in order to teach at a small village night-school whilst still carrying on her larger occupation of pupil-teacher in Sandbourne.

So she walked and read, and was soon in tears. Moreover, when she thought of what Ethelberta would have replied had that keen sister known the wildness of her true reason in wishing to go, she shuddered with misery. To wish to get near a man only because he had been kind to her, and had admired her pretty face, and had given her flowers, to be attached to him all the more because of its hopeless impracticability, were things to dream of, not to tell. Picotee was quite an unreasoning animal. Her sister arranged situations for her, told her how to conduct herself in them, how to make up anew, in unobtrusive shapes, the valuable

wearing apparel she sent from time to time—so as to provoke neither exasperation in the little gentry, nor superciliousness in the big—the goodness of which materials had attracted Faith Julian's quiet eyes. Ethelberta did everything for her, in short; and Picotee obeyed orders with the abstracted ease of mind which people show who have their thinking done for them, and put out their troubles as they do their washing. She was quite willing not to be clever herself, since it was unnecessary while she had a much-admired sister, who was clever enough for two people and to spare.

This arrangement, by which she gained an untroubled existence in exchange for freedom of will, had worked very pleasantly for Picotee until the anomaly of falling in love on her own account created a jar in the machinery. Then she began to know how wearing were miserable days, and how much more wearing were miserable nights. She pictured Christopher in London calling upon her dignified sister (for Ethelberta innocently mentioned his name sometimes in writing) and imagined over and over again the mutual signs of warm feeling between them. And now Picotee resolved upon a noble course. Like Juliet, she had been troubled with a consciousness that perhaps her love for Christopher was a trifle forward and unmaidenly, even though she had determined never to let him or anybody in the whole world know of

it. To set herself to pray that she might have strength to see him without a pang the lover of her sister, who deserved him so much more than herself, would be a grand penance and corrective.

After uttering petitions to this effect for several days, she still felt very bad; indeed, in the psychological difficulty of striving for what in her soul she did not desire, rather worse, if anything. At last, weary of walking the old road and never meeting him, and blank in a general powerlessness, she wrote the letter to Ethelberta, which was only the last one of a series that had previously been written and torn up.

Now this hope had been whirled away like thistle-down, and the case was grievous enough to distract a greater stoic than Picótee. The end of it was that she left the school on insufficient notice, gave up her cottage home on the plea—true in the letter—that she was going to join a relative in London, and went off thither by a morning train, leaving her things packed ready to be sent on when she should write for them.

Picotee arrived in town late on a cold February afternoon, bearing a small bag in her hand. She crossed Westminster-bridge on foot just after dusk, and saw a luminous haze hanging over each well-lighted street as it withdrew into distance behind the nearer houses, showing its direction as a train of morning mist shows the course of a distant stream when the stream itself is hidden. The lights along the

river-side towards Charing Cross sent an inverted palisade of gleaming swords down into the shaking water, and the pavement ticked to the touch of pedestrians' feet, most of whom tripped along as if walking only to practise a favourite quick step, and held handkerchiefs to their mouths to strain off the river mist from their lungs. She enquired her way to Connaught Crescent, and between five and six o'clock reached her sister's door.

Two or three minutes were passed in accumulating resolution sufficient to ring the bell, which when at last she did, was not performed in a way at all calculated to make the young man Joey hasten to the door. After the lapse of a certain time he did, however, find leisure to stroll and see what the caller might want, out of curiosity to know who there could be in London afraid to ring a bell twice.

Joey's delight exceeded even his surprise, the ruling maxim of his life being the more the merrier, under all circumstances. The beaming young man was about to run off and announce her upstairs and downstairs, left and right, when Picotée called him hastily to her. In the hall her quick young eye had caught sight of an umbrella with a peculiar horn handle—an umbrella she had been accustomed to meet on Sandbourne Moor on many happy afternoons. Christopher was evidently in the house.

'Joey,' she said, as if she were ready to faint,

‘don’t tell Berta I am come. She has company, has she not?’

‘O no—only Mr. Julian!’ said the brother. ‘He’s quite one of the family.’

‘Never mind—can’t I go down into the kitchen with you?’ she enquired. There had been bliss and misery mingled in those tidings, and she scarcely knew for a moment which way they affected her. What she did know was that she had run her dear fox to earth, and a sense of satisfaction at that feat prevented her just now from counting the cost of the performance.

‘Does Mr. Julian come to see her very often?’ said she.

‘Oh, yes—he’s always a-coming—a regular bore to me.’

‘A regular what?’

‘Bore!—Ah, I forgot, you don’t know our town words. However, come along.’

They passed by the doors on tiptoe, and their mother upstairs being, according to Joey’s account, in the midst of a nap, Picotee was unwilling to disturb her; so they went down at once to the kitchen, when forward rushed Gwendoline the cook, flourishing her floury hands, and Cornelia the housemaid, dancing over her brush; and these having welcomed and made Picotee comfortable, who should ring the area-bell, and be admitted down the steps but Sol and Dan. The workman-brothers, their day’s duties being over,

had called to see their relations, first, as usual, going home to their lodgings in Marylebone and making themselves as spruce as bridegrooms of a mild kind, according to the rules of their newly-acquired town experience. For the London mechanic is only nine hours a mechanic, though the country mechanic works, eats, drinks, and sleeps a mechanic throughout the whole twenty-four.

‘God bless my soul—Picotee!’ said Dan, standing fixed. ‘Well—I say, this is splendid: ha-ha!’

‘Picotee—what brought you here?’ said Sol, expanding the circumference of his face in satisfaction. ‘Well, come along—never mind so long as you be here.’

Picotee explained circumstances as well as she could without stating them, and, after a general conversation of a few minutes, Sol interrupted with—‘Anybody upstairs with Mrs. Petherwin?’

‘Mr. Julian was there just now,’ said Joey; ‘but he may be gone. Berta always lets him slip out how he can, the form of ringing me up not being necessary with him. Wait a minute—I’ll see.’

Joseph vanished up the stairs; and, the question whether Christopher were gone or not being an uninteresting one to the majority, the talking went on upon other matters. When Joey crept down again a minute later, Picotee was sitting aloof and silent, and he accordingly singled her out to speak to.

‘Such a lark, Picotee!’ he whispered, ‘Berta’s a-courting of her young man. Would you like to see how they carries on a bit?’

‘Dearly I should!’ said Picotee, the pupils of her eyes dilating.

Joey conducted her to the top of the basement stairs, and told her to listen. Within a few yards of them was the morning-room door, now standing ajar; and an intermittent flirtation in soft male and female tones could be heard going on inside. Picotee’s lips parted at thus learning the condition of things, and she leant against the stair-newel.

‘My! What’s the matter?’ said Joey.

‘If this is London, I don’t like it at all!’ moaned Picotee.

‘Well—I never see such a girl—fainting all over the stairs for nothing in the world.’

‘Oh—it will soon be gone—it is—it is only indigestion.’

‘Indigestion? Much you simple country people can know about that! You should see what devils of indigestions we get in high life—eating ’normous great dinners and suppers that require clever physicians to attend to ’em, or else they’d kill us off with gout next day; and waking in the morning with such a splitting headache, and dry throat, and inward cusses about human nature, that you feel all the world like some great lord. However, now let’s go down again.’

‘No, no, no!’ said the unhappy maiden, imploringly. ‘Hark!’

They listened again. The voices of the musician and poetess had changed: there was a decided frigidity in their tone—then came a louder expression—then a silence.

‘You needn’t be afraid,’ said Joey. ‘They won’t fight; bless you, they busts out quarrelling like this times and times when they’ve been over-friendly, but it soon gets straight with ’em again.’

There was now a quick walk across the room, and Joey and his sister drew down their heads out of sight. Then the room door was slammed, quick footsteps went along the hall, the front door closed just as loudly, and Christopher’s tread passed into nothing along the pavement.

‘That’s rather a wuss one than they mostly have; but Lord, ’tis nothing at all.’

‘I don’t much like biding here listening,’ said Picotee.

‘Oh, ’tis how we do all over the West End,’ said Joey. ‘’Tis yer ignorance of town life that makes it seem a good deal to ye.’

‘You can’t make much boast about town life; for you haven’t left off talking just as they do down in Wessex.’

‘Well, I own to that—what’s fair is fair, and ’tis a true charge; but if I talk the Wessex way ’tisn’t for

want of knowing better ; 'tis because my staunch nater makes me bide faithful to our old ancient institutions. You'd soon own 'twasn't ignorance in me, if you knowed what large quantities of noblemen I gets mixed up with every day. In fact 'tis thoughted here and there that I shall do very well in the world.'

'Well, let us go down,' said Picotee. 'Everything seems so overpowering here.'

'Oh, you'll get broke in soon enough. I felt just the same when I first entered into high life.'

'Do you think Berta will be angry with me? How does she treat you?'

'Well, I can't complain. You see she's my own flesh and blood, and what can I say? But, in secret truth, the wages is terrible low, and barely pays for the tobacco I consooms.'

'Oh, Joey, you wicked boy! If mother only knew that you smoked!'

'I don't mind the wickedness so much as the smell. And Mrs. Petherwin has got such a nose for a fellow's clothes. 'Tis one of the greatest knots in service—the smoke question. 'Tis thoughted that we shall make a great stir about it in the mansions of the nobility soon.'

'How much more you know of life than I do—you only fourteen and me seventeen!'

'Yes, that's true. You see, age is nothing—'tis opportunity. And even I can't boast, for many a younger man knows more.'

‘But don’t smoke, Joey—there’s a dear!’

‘What can I do? Society hev its rules, and if a person wishes to keep himself up, he must do as the world do. We be all Fashion’s slave—as much a slave as the meanest in the land!’

They got downstairs again; and when the dinner of the French lady and gentleman had been sent up and cleared away, and also Ethelberta’s evening tea (which she formed into a genuine meal, making a dinner of luncheon, when nobody was there, to give less trouble to her servant-sisters), they all sat round the fire. Then the rustle of a dress was heard on the staircase, and squirrel-haired Ethelberta appeared in person. It was her custom thus to come down every spare evening, to teach Joey and her sisters something or other—mostly French, which she spoke fluently; but the cook and housemaid showed more ambition than intelligence in acquiring that tongue, though Joey learnt it readily enough.

There was consternation in the camp for a moment or two, on account of poor Picotee, Ethelberta being not without firmness in matters of discipline. Her eye instantly lighted upon her disobedient sister, now looking twice as disobedient as she really was.

‘Oh, you are here, Picotee? I am glad to see you,’ said the mistress of the house, quietly.

This was altogether to Picotee’s surprise, for she had expected a round rating at least, in her freshness

hardly being aware that this reserve of feeling was an acquired habit of Ethelberta's, and that civility stood in town for as much vexation as a tantrum represented in Wessex.

Picotee lamely explained her outward reasons for coming, and soon began to find that Ethelberta's opinions on the matter would not be known by the tones of her voice. But innocent Picotee was as wily as a religionist in sly elusions of the letter whilst infringing the spirit of a dictum; and by talking very softly and earnestly about the wondrous good she could do by remaining in the house as governess to the children, and playing the part of lady's-maid to her sister at show times, she so far coaxed Ethelberta out of her intentions that she almost accepted the plan as a good one. It was agreed that for the present, at any rate, Picotee should remain. Then a visit was made to Mrs. Chickerel's room, where the remainder of the evening was passed; and harmony reigned in the household.

CHAPTER XXI.

ETHELBERTA'S DRAWING-ROOM.

PICOTEE's heart was fitfully glad. She was near the man who had enlarged her capacity from girl's to woman's, a little note or two of young feeling to a whole diapason ; and though nearness was perhaps not in itself a great reason for felicity when viewed beside the complete realisation of all that a woman can desire in such circumstances, it was much in comparison with the outer darkness of the previous time.

It became evident to all the family that some misunderstanding had arisen between Ethelberta and Mr. Julian. What Picotee hoped in the centre of her heart as to the issue of the affair it would be too complex a thing to say. If Christopher became cold towards her sister he would not come to the house ; if he continued to come it would really be as Ethelberta's lover—altogether, a pretty game of perpetual check for Picotee.

He did not make his appearance for several days. Picotee being a presentable girl, and decidedly finer-natured than her sisters below stairs, she sat occa-

sionally with Ethelberta in the afternoon when the teaching of the little ones had been done for the day ; and thus she had an opportunity of observing Ethelberta's emotional condition with reference to Christopher, which Picotee did with an interest that the elder sister was very far from suspecting.

At first Ethelberta seemed blithe enough without him. One more day went, and he did not come, and then her manner was that of apathy. Another day passed, and from fanciful elevations of the eyebrow, and long breathings, it became apparent that Ethelberta had decidedly passed the indifferent stage, and was getting seriously out of sorts about him. Next morning she looked all hope. He did not come that day either, and Ethelberta began to look pale with fear.

‘Why don’t you go out?’ said Picotee, timidly.

‘I can hardly tell : I have been expecting someone.’

‘When she comes I must run up to mother at once, must I not?’ said clever Picotee.

‘It is not a lady,’ said Ethelberta, blandly. She came then and stood by Picotee, and looked musingly out of the window. ‘I may as well tell you, perhaps,’ she continued. ‘It is Mr. Julian. He is—I suppose—my lover, in plain English.’

‘Ah!’ said Picotee.

‘Whom I am not going to marry until he gets rich.’

‘Ah—how strange! If I had him—such a lover, I mean—I would marry him if he continued poor.’

‘I don’t doubt it, Picotee ; just as you come to London without caring about consequences, or would do any other crazy thing and not mind in the least what came of it. But somebody in the family must take a practical view of affairs, or we should all go to the dogs.’

Picotee recovered from the snubbing which she felt that she deserved, and charged gallantly by saying, with delicate showings of indifference, ‘Do you love this Mr. What’s-his-name of yours?’

‘Mr. Julian? Oh, he’s a very gentlemanly man. That is, except when he is rude, and ill-uses me, and will not come and apologise!’

‘If I had him—a lover, I would ask him to come if I wanted him to.’

Ethelberta did not give her mind to this remark ; but, drawing a long breath, said, with a pouting laugh, which presaged unreality, ‘The idea of his getting indifferent now ! I have been intending to keep him on until I got tired of his attentions, and then put an end to them by marrying him ; but here is he, before he has hardly declared himself, forgetting my existence as much as if he had vowed to love and cherish me for life. ’Tis an unnatural inversion of the manners of good society.’

‘When did you first get to care for him, dear Berta?’

‘Oh—when I had seen him once or twice.’

‘ Goodness—how quick you were ! ’

‘ Yes—if I am in the mind for loving I am not to be hindered by shortness of acquaintanceship. ’

‘ Nor I neither ! ’ sighed Picotee.

‘ Nor any other woman. We don’t need to know a man well in order to love him. That’s only necessary when we want to leave off. ’

‘ Oh, Berta—you don’t believe that ! ’

‘ If a woman did not invariably form an opinion of her choice before she has half seen him, and love him before she has half formed an opinion, there would be no tears and pining in the whole feminine world, and poets would starve for want of a topic. I don’t believe it, do you say ? Ah, well, we shall see. ’

Picotee did not know what to say to this ; and Ethelberta left the room to see about her duties as public story-teller, in which capacity she had undertaken to appear again this very evening.



"GOODNESS! HOW QUICK YOU WERE!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF THE HALL—THE
ROAD HOME.

LONDON was illuminated by the broad full moon. The pavements looked white as if mantled with snow; ordinary houses were sublimated to the rank of public buildings, public buildings to palaces, and the faces of women walking the streets to those of calendared saints and guardian-angels, by the pure bleaching light from the sky.

In the quiet little street where opened the private door of the Hall chosen by Ethelberta for her story-telling, a brougham was waiting. The time was about eleven o'clock; and presently a lady came out from the building, the moonbeams forthwith flooding her face, which they showed to be that of the Story-teller herself. She hastened across to the carriage, when a second thought arrested her motion: telling the man-servant and a female inside the brougham to wait for her, she wrapped up her features and glided round to the front of the house, where she paused to observe the carriages and cabs driving up to receive the fashionable

crowd stepping down from the doors. Standing here in the throng which her own talent and ingenuity had drawn together, she appeared to enjoy herself by listening for a minute or two to the names of several persons of more or less distinction as they were called out, and then regarded attentively the faces of others of lesser degree : to scrutinise the latter was, as the event proved, the real object of the journey from round the corner. When nearly everyone had left the doors, she turned back disappointed. Ethelberta had been fancying that her alienated lover Christopher was in the back rows to-night, but, as far as could now be observed, the hopeful supposition was a false one.

When she got round to the back again, a man came forward. It was Ladywell, whom she had spoken to already that evening. 'Allow me to bring you your note-book, Mrs. Petherwin : I think you had forgotten it,' he said. 'I assure you that nobody has handled it but myself.'

Ethelberta thanked him, and took the book. 'I use it to look into between the parts, in case my memory should fail me,' she explained. 'I remember that I did lay it down, now you remind me.'

Ladywell had apparently more to say, and moved by her side towards the carriage ; but she declined the arm he offered, and said not another word till he went on, haltingly :

'Your triumph to-night was very great, and it was

as much a triumph to me as to you ; I cannot express my feeling—I cannot say half that I would. If I might only——’

‘Thank you much,’ said Ethelberta, with dignity. ‘Thank you for bringing my book, but I must go home now. I know that you will see that it is not necessary for us to be talking here.’

‘Yes—you are quite right,’ said the repressed young painter, struck by her seriousness. ‘Blame me ; I ought to have known better. But perhaps a man—well, I will say it—a lover without indiscretion is no lover at all. Circumspection and devotion are a contradiction in terms. I saw that, and hoped that I might speak without real harm.’

‘You calculated how to be uncalculating, and are natural by art !’ she said, with the slightest accent of sarcasm. ‘But pray do not attend me further—it is not at all necessary or desirable. My maid is in the carriage.’ She bowed, turned, and entered the vehicle, seating herself beside Picotee.

‘It was harsh !’ said Ladywell to himself, as he looked after the retreating carriage. ‘I was a fool ; but it was harsh. Yet what man on earth likes a woman to show too great a readiness at first ? She is right : she would be nothing without repulse !’ And he moved away in an opposite direction.

‘What man was that ?’ said Picotee, as they drove along.

‘Oh—a mere Mr. Ladywell: a painter of good family (infrequent combination, is it not?) to whom I have been sitting for what he calls an Idealisation. He is a dreadful simpleton.’

‘Why did you choose him?’

‘I did not: he chose me. But his silliness of behaviour is a hopeful sign for the picture. I have seldom known a man cunning with his brush who was not simple with his tongue; or, indeed, any skill in particular that was not allied to general stupidity.’

‘Your own skill is not like that, is it, Berta?’

‘In men—in men. I don’t mean in women. How childish you are!’

The slight depression at finding that Christopher was not present, which had followed Ethelberta’s public triumph that evening, was covered over, if not removed, by Ladywell’s declaration, and she reached home serene in spirit. That she had not the slightest notion of accepting the impulsive painter made little difference; a lover’s arguments being apt to affect a lady’s mood as much by measure as by weight. A useless declaration, like a rare china tea-cup with a hole in it, has its ornamental value in enlarging a collection.

No sooner had they entered the house than Mr. Julian’s card was discovered; and Joey informed them that he had come particularly to speak with Ethelberta, quite forgetting that it was her evening for tale-telling.

This was real delight, for between her excitements

Ethelberta had been seriously sick-hearted at the horrible possibility of his never calling again. But alas! for Christopher. There being nothing like a dead silence for getting one's offhand sweetheart into a corner, there is nothing like prematurely ending it for getting into that corner one's self.

'Now won't I punish him for daring to stay away so long!' she exclaimed, as soon as she got upstairs. 'It is as bad to show constancy in your manners as fickleness in your heart at such a time as this.'

'But I thought honesty was the best policy?' said Picotee.

'So it is, for the man's purpose. But don't you go believing in sayings, Picotee: they are all made by men, for their own advantages. Women who use public proverbs as a guide through events are those who have not ingenuity enough to make private ones as each event occurs.'

She sat down, and rapidly wrote a line to Mr. Julian:

'Connaught Crescent.

'I return from Mayfair Hall to find you have called. You will, I know, be good enough to excuse my saying what seems an unfriendly thing, when I assure you that the circumstances of my peculiar situation make it desirable, if not necessary. It is that I beg you not to give me the pleasure of a visit from you for some little time, for unhappily the frequency of your kind calls has

been noticed ; and I am now in fear that we may be talked about—invidiously—to the injury of us both. The town, or a section of it, has turned its bull's-eye upon me with a brightness which I did not in the least anticipate ; and you will, I am sure, perceive how indispensable it is that I should be circumspect.

‘ Yours sincerely,

‘ E. PETHERWIN.’

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STREET.—NEIGH'S ROOMS.—CHRISTOPHER'S ROOMS.

As soon as Ethelberta had driven off from the Hall, Ladywell turned back again; and, passing the front entrance, overtook his acquaintance Mr. Neigh, who had been one of the last to emerge. The two were going in the same direction, and they walked a short distance together.

‘Has anything serious happened?’ said Neigh, noticing an abstraction in his companion. ‘You don’t seem in your usual mood to-night.’

‘Oh, it is only that affair between us,’ said Ladywell, as one who refrained from using a pistol upon himself because his life was not worth powder and shot.

‘Affair? Between you and whom?’

‘Her and myself, of course. It will be in every fellow’s mouth now, I suppose!’

‘But—not anything between yourself and Mrs. Petherwin?’

‘A mere nothing. But surely you started, Neigh, when you suspected it just this moment?’

‘No—you merely fancied that.’

‘Did she not speak well to-night! You were in the room, I believe?’

‘Yes, I just turned in for half an hour: it seems that everybody does, so I thought I must. But I had no idea that you were feeble that way.’

‘It is very kind of you, Neigh—upon my word it is—very kind; and of course I appreciate the delicacy which—which——’

‘What’s kind?’

‘I mean your well-intentioned plan for making me believe that nothing is known of this. But stories will of course get wind; and if our attachment has made more noise in the world than I intended it should, and causes any public interest, why—ha-ha!—it must. There is some little romance in it perhaps, and people will talk of matters of that sort between individuals of any repute—little as that is with one of the pair.’

‘Of course they will—of course. You are a rising man, remember, whom some day the world will delight to honour.’

‘Thank you for that, Neigh. Thank you sincerely.’

‘Not at all. It is merely justice to say it, and one must be generous to deserve thanks.’

‘Ha-ha!—that’s very nicely put, and undeserved I am sure. And yet I need a word of that sort sometimes!’

‘Genius is proverbially modest.’

‘Pray don’t, Neigh—I don’t deserve it, indeed. Of

course it is well meant in you to recognise any slight powers—ha-ha!—but I don't deserve it. Certainly, my self-assurance was never too great. 'Tis the misfortune of all children of art that they should be so dependent upon any scraps of praise they can pick up to help them along.'

'And when that child gets so deep in love that you can only see the whites of his eyes——'

'Ah—now, Neigh—don't, I say!'

'But why did——'

'Why did I love her?'

'Yes, why did you love her.'

'Ah, if I could only turn self-vivisector, and watch the operation of my heart, I should know!'

'My dear fellow, you must be very bad indeed to talk like that. A poet himself couldn't be cleaner gone.'

'Now, don't chaff, Neigh; do anything, but don't chaff. You know that I am the easiest man in the world for taking it at most times. But I can't stand it now; I don't feel up to it. A glimpse of paradise, and then perdition. What would you do, Neigh?'

'She has refused you, then?'

'Well—not positively refused me; but it is so near it that a dull man couldn't tell the difference. I hardly can myself.'

'How do you really stand with her?' said Neigh, with an anxiety ill-concealed.

‘Off and on—neither one thing nor the other. I was determined to make an effort the last time she sat to me, and so I met her quite coolly, and spoke only of technicalities with a forced smile—you know that way of mine for drawing people out, eh, Neigh?’

‘Quite, quite.’

‘A forced smile, as much as to say, “I am obliged to entertain you, but as a mere model for art purposes.” But the deuce a bit did she care. And then I frequently looked to see what time it was, as the end of the sitting drew near—rather a rude thing to do, as a rule.’

‘Of course. But that was your *finesse*. Ha-ha!—capital! Yet why not struggle against such slavery? It is regularly pulling you down. What’s a woman’s beauty, after all?’

‘Well you may say so! a thing easier to feel than define,’ murmured Ladywell. ‘But it’s no use, Neigh—I can’t help it as long as she repulses me so exquisitely! If she would only care for me a little, I might get to trouble less about her.’

‘And love her no more than one ordinarily does a girl by the time one gets irrevocably engaged to her. But I suppose she keeps you back so thoroughly that you carry on the old adoration with as much vigour as if it were a new fancy every time?’

‘Partly yes, and partly no! It’s very true, and it’s not true!’

‘ ’Tis to be hoped she won’t hate you outright, for then you would absolutely die of idolising her.’

‘ Don’t, Neigh !—still there’s some truth in it—such is the perversity of our hearts. Fancy marrying such a woman !’

‘ We should feel as eternally united to her after years and years of marriage as to a dear new angel met at last night’s dance.’

‘ Exactly—just what I should have said. But did I hear you say “ We,” Neigh ? You didn’t say “ *We* should feel ? ”’

‘ Say “ we ” ?—yes—of course—putting myself in your place just in the way of speaking, you know.’

‘ Of course, of course ; but one is such a fool at these times that one seems to detect rivalry in every trumpery sound ! Were you never a little touched ?’

‘ Not I. My heart is in the happy position of a country which has no history or debt.’

‘ I suppose I should rejoice to hear it,’ said Ladywell. ‘ But the consciousness of a fellow-sufferer being in just such another hole is such a relief always, and softens the sense of one’s folly so very much.’

‘ There’s less Christianity in that sentiment than in your confessing to it, old fellow. I know the truth of it nevertheless, and that’s why married men advise others to marry. Were all the world tied up, the pleasantly tied ones would be equivalent to those at

present free. But what if your fellow-sufferer is not only in another such a hole, but in the same one?’

‘No, Neigh—never! Don’t trifle with a friend who——’

‘That is, refused like yourself, as well as in love.’

‘Ah, thanks, thanks! It suddenly occurred to me that we might be dead against one another as rivals, and a friendship of many long—days be snapped like a—like a reed.’

‘No—no—only a jest,’ said Neigh, with a strangely accelerated speech. ‘Love-making is an ornamental pursuit that matter-of-fact fellows like me are quite unfit for. A man must have courted at least half-a-dozen women before he’s a match for one; and since triumph lies so far ahead, I shall keep out of the contest altogether.’

‘Your life would be pleasanter if you were engaged. It is a nice thing, after all.’

‘It is. The worst of it would be that, when the time came for breaking it off, a fellow might get into an action for breach—women are so fond of that sort of thing now; and I hate love-affairs that don’t end peaceably!’

‘But end it by peaceably marrying, my dear fellow.’

‘It would seem so singular. Besides, I have a horror of antiquity: and you see, as long as a man keeps single, he belongs in a measure to the rising

generation, however old he may be ; but as soon as he marries and has children, he belongs to the last generation, however young he may be. Old Jones's son is a deal younger than young Brown's father, though they are both the same age.'

'At any rate, honest courtship cures a man of many evils he had no power to stem before.'

'By substituting an incurable matrimony!'

'Ah—two persons must have a mind for that before it can happen!' said Ladywell, sorrowfully shaking his head.

'I think you'll find that if one has a mind for it, it will be quite sufficient. But here we are at my rooms. Come in for half an hour?'

'Not to-night, thanks!'

They parted, and Neigh went in. When he got upstairs he murmured in his deepest chest note, 'Oh, lords, that I should come to this! But I shall never be such a fool as to marry her! What a flat that poor young devil was not to discover that we were tarred with the same brush. Oh, the deuce! the deuce!' he continued, walking about the room as if passionately stamping, but not quite doing it because another man had rooms below.

Neigh drew from his pocket-book an envelope embossed with the name of a fashionable photographer, and out of this pulled a portrait of the lady who had, in fact, enslaved his secret self equally with his frank

young friend the painter. After contemplating it awhile with a face of cynical adoration, he murmured, shaking his head, 'Ah, my lady; if you only knew this, I should be snapped up like a snail! Not a minute's peace for me till I had married you. I wonder if I shall!—I wonder.'

Neigh was a man of five-and-thirty—Ladywell's senior by ten years; and, being of a phlegmatic temperament, he had glided thus far through the period of eligibility with impunity. He knew as well as any man how far he could go with a woman and yet keep clear of having to meet her in church without her bonnet; but it is doubtful if his mind that night were less disturbed with the question how to guide himself out of the natural course which his passion for Ethelberta might tempt him into, than was Ladywell's by his ardent wish to secure her.

About the time at which Neigh and Ladywell parted company, Christopher Julian was entering his little place in Bloomsbury. The quaint figure of Faith, in her bonnet and cloak, was kneeling on the hearth-rug, endeavouring to stir a dull fire into a bright one.

'What—Faith! you have never been out alone?' he said.

Faith's soft, quick-shutting eyes looked unutterable things, and she replied, 'I have been to hear Mrs. Petherwin's story-telling again.'

‘And walked all the way home through the streets at this time of night, I suppose!’

‘Well, nobody molested me, either going or coming back.’

‘Faith, I gave you strict orders not to go into the streets after two o’clock in the day, and now here you are taking no notice of what I say at all!’

‘The truth is, Kit, I wanted to see with my spectacles what this woman was really like, and I went without them last time. I slipped in behind, and nobody saw me.’

‘I don’t think much of her after what I have seen to-night,’ said Christopher, moodily recurring to a previous thought.

‘Why? What is the matter?’

‘I thought I would call on her this afternoon, but when I got there I found she had left early for the performance. So in the evening, when I thought it would be all over, I went to the private door of the Hall to speak to her as she came out, and ask her flatly a question or two which I was fool enough to think I must ask her before I went to bed. Just as I was drawing near she came out, and, instead of getting into the brougham that was waiting for her, she went round the corner. When she came back a man met her and gave her something, and they stayed talking together two or three minutes. The meeting may certainly not have been intentional on her part; but she has no

business to be going on so coolly when—when—in fact, I have come to the conclusion that a woman's affection is not worth having. The only feeling which has any dignity or permanence or worth is family affection between close blood-relations.'

'And yet you snub me sometimes, Mr. Kit.'

'And, for the matter of that, you snub me. Still you know what I mean—there's none of that off-and-on humbug between us. If we grumble with one another we are united just the same: if we don't write when we are parted, we are just the same when we meet—there has been some rational reason for silence; but as for lovers and sweethearts, there is nothing worth a rush in what they feel!'

Faith said nothing in reply to this. The opinions she had formed upon the wisdom of her brother's pursuit of Ethelberta would have come just then with an ill grace. It must, however, have been evident to Christopher, had he not been too preoccupied for observation, that Faith's impressions of Ethelberta were not quite favourable as regarded her womanhood, notwithstanding that she greatly admired her talents.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE.

ETHELBERTA came indoors one day from the University boat-race, and sat down, without speaking, beside Picotee, as if lost in thought.

‘Did you enjoy the sight?’ said Picotee.

‘I scarcely know. We couldn’t see at all from Mrs. Belmaine’s carriage, so two of us—very rashly—agreed to get out and be rowed across to the other side where the people were quite few. But when the boatman had us in the middle of the river he declared he couldn’t land us on the other side because of the barges; so there we were in a dreadful state—tossed up and down like corks upon great waves made by steamers till I made up my mind for a drowning. Well, at last we got back again, but couldn’t reach the carriage for the crowd; and I don’t know what we should have done if a gentleman hadn’t come—sent by Mrs. Belmaine, who was in a great fright about us; then I was introduced to him, and—I wonder how it will end!’

‘Was there anything so wonderful in the beginning, then?’

‘Yes. One of the coolest and most practised men in London was ill-mannered towards me from sheer absence of mind—and could there be higher flattery? When a man of that sort does not give you the politeness you deserve, it means that in his heart he is rebelling against another feeling which his pride suggests that you do not deserve. Oh, I forgot to say that he is a Mr. Neigh, a nephew of Mr. Doncastle’s, who lives at ease about Piccadilly and Pall Mall, and has a few acres somewhere—but I don’t know much of him. The worst of my position now is that I excite this superficial interest in many people and a deep friendship in nobody. If what all my supporters feel could be collected into the hearts of two or three they would love me better than they love themselves; but now it pervades all and operates in none.’

‘But it must operate in this gentleman?’

‘Well, yes—just for the present. But men in town have so many contrivances for getting out of love that you can’t calculate upon keeping them in for two days together. However, it is all the same to me. There’s only—but let that be.’

‘What is there only?’ said Picotee, coaxingly.

‘Only one man,’ murmured Ethelberta, in much lower tones. ‘I mean, whose wife I should care to

be; and the very qualities I like in him will, I fear, prevent his ever being in a position to ask me.'

'Is he the man you punished the week before last by forbidding him to come?'

'Perhaps he is; but he does not want civility from me. Where there's much feeling, there's little ceremony.'

'It certainly seems that he does not want civility from you to make him attentive to you,' said Picotee, stifling a sigh; 'for here is a letter in his handwriting, I believe.'

'You might have given it to me at once,' said Ethelberta, opening the envelope hastily. It contained very few sentences: they were to the effect that Christopher had received her letter forbidding him to call; that he had therefore at first resolved not to call or ever see her more, since he had become such a shadow in her path. Still, as it was always best to do nothing hastily, he had on second thoughts decided to ask her to grant him a last special favour, and see him again just once, for a few minutes only that afternoon, in which he might at least say Farewell. To avoid all possibility of compromising her in anybody's eyes, he would call at half-past six, when other callers were likely to be gone, knowing that from the peculiar constitution of her household the hour would not interfere with her arrangements. There being no time for an answer, he would assume that she would see him,

and keep the engagement; the request being one which could not rationally be objected to.

‘There—read it!’ said Ethelberta, with glad displeasure. ‘Did you ever hear such audacity? Fixing a time so soon that I cannot reply, and thus making capital out of a pretended necessity, when it is really an arbitrary arrangement of his own. That’s real rebellion—forcing himself into my house when I said strictly he was not to come; and then, that it cannot rationally be objected to—I don’t like his “rationally.”’

‘Where there’s much love there’s little ceremony, didn’t you say just now?’ observed innocent Picotee.

‘And where there’s little love, no ceremony at all. These manners of his are dreadful, and I believe he will never improve.’

‘It makes you care not a bit about him, does it not, Berta?’ said Picotee, hopefully.

‘I don’t answer for that,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I feel, as many others do, that a blindness to ceremony which is produced by abstraction of mind is no defect in a poet or musician, fatal as it may be to an ordinary man.’

‘Mighty me! You soon forgive him.’

‘Picotee, don’t you be so quick to speak. Before I have finished, how do you know what I am going to say? I’ll never tell you anything again, if you take me up so. Of course I am going to punish him at

once, and make him remember that I am a lady, even if I do like him a little.'

'How do you mean to punish him?' said Picotee, with interest.

'By writing and telling him that on no account is he to come.'

'But there is not time for a letter——'

'That doesn't matter. It will show him that I did not *mean* him to come.'

At hearing the very merciful nature of the punishment, Picotee sighed without replying; and Ethelberta despatched her note.

The hour of appointment drew near, and Ethelberta showed symptoms of unrest. Six o'clock struck and passed. She walked here and there for nothing, and it was plain that a dread was filling her: her letter might accidentally have had, in addition to the moral effect which she had intended, the practical effect which she did not intend, by arriving before, instead of after, his purposed visit to her, thereby stopping him in spite of all her care.

'How long are letters going to Bloomsbury?' she said, suddenly.

'Two hours, Joey tells me,' replied Picotee, who had already enquired on her own private account.

'There!' exclaimed Ethelberta, petulantly. 'How I dislike a man to misrepresent things! He said there was not time for a reply!'

‘Perhaps he didn’t know,’ said Picotee, in angel tones; ‘and so it happens all right, and he has got it, and he will not come after all.’

They waited and waited, but Christopher did not appear that night; the true case being that his declaration about insufficient time for a reply was merely an ingenious suggestion to her not to be so cruel as to forbid him. He was far from suspecting when the letter of denial did reach him—about an hour before the time of appointment—that it was sent by a refinement of art, of which the real intention was futility, and that but for his own mis-statement it would have been carefully delayed.

The next day another letter came from the musician, decidedly short and to the point. The irate lover stated that he would not be made a fool of any longer: under any circumstances he meant to come that self-same afternoon, and should decidedly expect her to see him.

‘I will not see him!’ said Ethelberta. ‘Why did he not call last night?’

‘Because you told him not to,’ said Picotee.

‘Good gracious, as if a woman’s words are to be translated as literally as Homer! Surely he is aware that more often than not “No” is said to a man’s importunities because it is traditionally the correct modest reply, and for nothing else in the world. If all men took words as superficially as he does, we should die of decorum in shoals.’

‘ Ah, Berta ! how could you write a letter that you did not mean should be obeyed ? ’

‘ I did in a measure mean it, although I could have shown Christian forgiveness if it had not been. Never mind ; I will not see him. I’ll plague my heart for the credit of my sex.’

To ensure the fulfilment of this resolve, Ethelberta determined to give way to a headache that she was beginning to be aware of, go to her room, disorganise her dress, and ruin her hair by lying down ; so putting it out of her power to descend and meet Christopher on any momentary impulse.

Picotee sat in the room with her, reading, or pretending to read, and Ethelberta pretended to sleep. Christopher’s knock came up the stairs, and with it the end of the farce.

‘ I’ll tell you what,’ said Ethelberta, in the prompt and broadly-awake tone of one who had been concentrated on the expectation of that sound for a length of time, ‘ it was a mistake in me to do this ! Joey will be sure to make a muddle of it.’

Joey was heard coming up the stairs. Picotee opened the door, and said, with an anxiety transcending Ethelberta’s, ‘ Well ? ’

‘ Oh, will you tell Mrs. Petherwin that Mr. Julian says he’ll wait.’

‘ You were not to ask him to wait,’ said Ethelberta within.

‘I know that,’ said Joey, ‘and I didn’t. He’s doing that out of his own head.’

‘Then let Mr. Julian wait, by all means,’ said Ethelberta. ‘Allow him to wait if he likes, but tell him it is uncertain if I shall be able to come down.’

Joey then retired, and the two sisters remained in silence.

‘I wonder if he’s gone,’ Ethelberta said at the end of a long time.

‘I thought you were asleep,’ said Picotee. ‘Shall we ask Joey? I have not heard the door close.’

Joey was summoned, and after a leisurely ascent, interspersed by various gymnastic performances over the handrail here and there, appeared again.

‘He’s there jest the same: he don’t seem to be in no hurry at all,’ said Joey.

‘What is he doing?’ enquired Picotee, solicitously.

‘Oh, only looking at his watch sometimes, and humming tunes, and playing rat-a-tat-tat upon the table. He says he don’t mind waiting a bit.’

‘You must have made a mistake in the message,’ said Ethelberta within.

‘Well, no. I am correct as a jeneral thing. I jest said perhaps you would be engaged all the evening, and perhaps you wouldn’t.’

When Joey had again retired, and they had waited another ten minutes, Ethelberta said, ‘Picotee, do you go down and speak a few words to him. I am deter-

mined he shall not see me. You know him a little: you remember when he came to the Lodge?’

‘What must I say to him?’

Ethelberta paused before replying. ‘Try to find out if—if he is much grieved at not seeing me, and say—give him to understand that I will forgive him, Picotee.’

‘Very well.’

‘And Picotee——’

‘Yes.’

‘If he says he *must* see me—I think I will get up. But only if he says *must*: you remember that.’

Picotee departed on her errand. She paused on the staircase trembling, and thinking between the thrills how very far would have been the conduct of her poor slighted self from proud recalcitration had Mr. Julian’s gentle request been addressed to her instead of to Ethelberta; and she went some way in the painful discovery of how much more tantalising it was to watch an envied situation that was held by another than to be out of sight of it altogether. Here was Christopher waiting to bestow love, and Ethelberta not going down to receive it: a commodity unequalled in value by any other in the whole wide world was being wantonly wasted within that very house. If she could only have stood to-night as the beloved Ethelberta, and not as the despised Picotee, how different would be this going down! Thus she went along, red

and pale moving in her cheeks as in the Northern Lights at their strongest time.

Meanwhile Christopher had sat waiting minute by minute till the evening shades grew browner, and the fire sank low. Joey, finding himself not particularly wanted upon the premises after the second enquiry, had slipped out to witness a nigger performance round the corner, and Julian began to think himself forgotten by all the household. The perception gradually cooled his emotions, and enabled him to hold his hat quite steadily.

When Picotee gently thrust open the door she was surprised to find the room in darkness, the fire gone completely out, and the form of Christopher only visible by a faint patch of light, which, coming from a lamp on the opposite side of the way and falling upon the mirror, was thrown as a pale nebulosity upon his shoulder. Picotee was too flurried at sight of the familiar outline to know what to do, and, instead of going or calling for a light, she mechanically advanced into the room. Christopher did not turn or move in any way, and then she perceived that he had begun to doze in his chair.

Instantly, with the precipitancy of the timorous she said, 'Mr. Julian!' and touched him on the shoulder—murmuring then, 'Oh, I beg pardon, I—I will get a light.'

Christopher's consciousness returned, and his first

act, before rising, was to exclaim, in a confused manner, 'Ah—you have come—thank you, Berta!' then impulsively to seize her hand, as it hung beside his head, and kiss it warmly. He stood up, still holding her fingers.

Picotee gasped out something, but was completely deprived of articulate utterance, and in another moment, being unable to control herself at this sort of first meeting with the man she had gone through fire and water to be near, and more particularly by the overpowering kiss upon her hand, not meant for hers at all, burst into hysterical sobbing. Julian, in his inability to imagine so much emotion—or at least the exhibition of it—in Ethelberta, gently drew Picotee further forward by the hand he held, and utilised the solitary spot of light from the mirror by making it fall upon her face. Recognising the childish features, he at once, with an exclamation, dropped her hand and started back. Being in point of fact a complete bundle of nerves and nothing else, his thin figure shook like a harp-string in painful excitement at a contretemps which would scarcely have quickened the pulse of an ordinary man.

Poor Picotee, feeling herself in the wind of a civil d——, started back also, sobbing more than ever. It was a little too much that the first result of his discovery of the mistake should be absolute repulse. She leant against the mantelpiece, when Julian, much be-

wildered at her superfluity of emotion, assisted her to a seat in sheer humanity. But Christopher was by no means pleased when he again thought round the circle of circumstances.

‘How could you allow such an absurd thing to happen?’ he said, in a stern, though trembling voice. ‘You knew I might mistake. I had no idea you were in the house: I thought you were miles away, at Sandbourne or somewhere! But I see: it is just done for a joke, ha-ha!’

This made Picotee rather worse still. ‘O-o-o-oh!’ she replied, in the tone of pouring from a bottle. ‘What shall I do-o-o-o!’ It is—not done for a—joke at all-l-l-l!’

‘Not done for a joke? Then never mind—don’t cry, Picotee. What was it done for, I wonder?’

Picotee, mistaking the purport of his enquiry, imagined him to refer to her arrival in the house, quite forgetting, in her guilty sense of having come on his account, that he would have no right or thought of asking questions about a natural visit to a sister, and she said: ‘When you—went away from—Sandbourne, I—I—I didn’t know what to do, and then I ran away, and came here, and then Ethelberta—was angry with me; but she says I may stay; but she doesn’t know—that I know you, and how we used to meet along the road every morning—and I am afraid to tell her—Oh, what shall I do!’

‘Never mind it,’ said Christopher, a sense of the true state of her case dawning upon him with unpleasant distinctness, and bringing some irritation at his awkward position; though it was impossible to be long angry with a girl who had not reasoning foresight enough to perceive that doubtful pleasure and certain pain must be the result of any meeting whilst hearts were at cross purposes in this way.

‘Where is your sister?’ he asked.

‘She wouldn’t come down, unless she *must*,’ said Picotee. ‘You have vexed her, and she has a headache besides that, and I came instead.’

‘So that I mightn’t be wasted altogether. Well, it’s a strange business between the three of us. I have heard of one-sided love, and reciprocal love, and all sorts, but this is my first experience of a concatenated affection. You follow me, I follow Ethelberta, and she follows—Heaven knows who!’

‘Mr. Ladywell!’ said the mortified Picotee.

‘Good Lord, if I didn’t think so!’ said Christopher, feeling to the soles of his feet like a man in a legitimate drama.

‘No, no, no!’ said the frightened girl, hastily. ‘I am not sure it is Mr. Ladywell. That’s altogether a mistake of mine!’

‘Ah, yes, you want to screen her,’ said Christopher, with a withering smile at the spot of light. ‘Very sisterly, doubtless; but none of that will do for me. I

am too old a bird by far—by very far! Now are you sure she does not love Ladywell?’

‘Yes!’

‘Well, perhaps I blame her wrongly. She may have some little faith in her—a woman has, here and there. How do you know she does not love Ladywell?’

‘Because she would prefer Mr. Neigh to him, any day.’

‘Ha!’

No, no—you mistake, sir—she doesn’t love either at all—Ethelberta doesn’t. I meant that she cannot love Mr. Ladywell because he stands lower in her opinion than Mr. Neigh, and him she certainly does not care for. She only loves you. If you only knew how true she is you wouldn’t be so suspicious about her, and I wish I had not come here—yes, I do!’

‘I cannot tell what to think of it. Perhaps I don’t know much of this world after all, or what girls will do. But you don’t excuse her to me, Picotee.’

Before this time Picotee had been simulating haste in getting a light; but in her dread of appearing visibly to Christopher’s eyes, and showing him the precise condition of her tear-stained face, she put it off moment after moment, and stirred the fire, in hope that the faint illumination thus produced would be sufficient to save her from the charge of stupid conduct as entertainer.

Fluttering about on the horns of this dilemma, she was greatly relieved when Christopher, who read her difficulty, and the general painfulness of the situation, said that since Ethelberta was really suffering from a headache he would not wish to disturb her till to-morrow, and went off downstairs and into the street without further ceremony.

Meanwhile other things had transpired upstairs. No sooner had Picotee left her sister's room, than Ethelberta thought it would after all have been much better if she had gone down herself to speak to this admirably persistent lover. Was she not drifting somewhat into the character of coquette, even if her ground of offence—a word of Christopher's about somebody else's mean parentage, which was spoken in utter forgetfulness of her own position, but had wounded her to the quick nevertheless—was to some extent a tenable one? She knew what facilities in suffering Christopher always showed; how a touch to other people was a blow to him, a blow to them his deep wound, although he took such pains to look stolid and unconcerned under those inflictions, and tried to smile as if he had no feelings whatever. It would be more generous to go down to him, and be kind. She jumped up with that alertness which comes so spontaneously at those sweet bright times when desire and duty run hand in hand.

She hastily set her hair and dress in order—not

such matchless order as she could have wished them to be in, but time was precious—and descended the stairs. When on the point of pushing open the drawing-room door, which wanted about an inch of being closed, she was astounded to discover that the room was in total darkness, and still more to hear Picotee sobbing inside. To retreat again was the only action she was capable of at that moment: the clash between this picture and the anticipated scene of Picotee and Christopher sitting in frigid propriety at opposite sides of a well-lighted room was too great. She flitted upstairs again with the least possible rustle, and flung herself down on the couch as before, panting with excitement at the new knowledge that had come to her.

There was only one possible construction to be put upon this in Ethelberta's rapid mind, and that approximated to the true one. She had known for some time that Picotee once had a lover, or something akin to it, and that he had disappointed her in a way which had never been told. No stranger, save in the capacity of the one beloved, could wound a woman sufficiently to make her weep, and it followed that Christopher was the man of Picotee's choice. As Ethelberta recalled the conversations, conclusion after conclusion came like pulsations in an aching head. 'Oh, how did it happen, and who is to blame?' she exclaimed. 'I cannot doubt

his faith, and I cannot doubt hers ; and yet how can I keep doubting them both ? ’

It was characteristic of Ethelberta’s jealous motherly guard over her young sisters that, amid these contending enquiries, her foremost feeling was less one of hope for her own love than of championship for Picotee’s.

CHAPTER XXV.

ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE—(*continued*).

PICOTEE was heard on the stairs: Ethelberta covered her face.

‘Is he waiting?’ she said faintly, on finding that Picotee did not begin to speak.

‘No; he is gone,’ said Picotee.

‘Ah, why is that?’ came quickly from under the handkerchief. ‘He has forgotten me—that’s what it is!’

‘Oh no, he has not!’ said Picotee just as bitterly.

Ethelberta had far too much heroism to let much in this strain escape her, though her sister was prepared to go any lengths in the same. ‘I suppose,’ continued Ethelberta, in the quiet way of one who had only a headache the matter with her, ‘that he remembered you after the meeting at Anglebury?’

‘Yes, he remembered me.’

‘Did you tell me you had seen him before that time?’

‘I had seen him at Sandbourne. I don’t think I told you.’

‘At whose house did you meet him?’

‘At nobody’s. I only saw him sometimes,’ replied Picotee, in great distress.

Ethelberta, though of all women most miserable, was brimming with compassion for the throbbing girl so nearly related to her, in whom she continually saw her own weak points without the counterpoise of her strong ones. But it was necessary to repress herself awhile: the intended ways of her life were blocked and broken up by this jar of interests, and she wanted time to ponder new plans. ‘Picotee, I would rather be alone now, if you don’t mind,’ she said. ‘You need not leave me any light; it makes my eyes ache, I think.’

Picotee left the room. But Ethelberta had not long been alone and in darkness when somebody gently opened the door, and entered without a candle.

‘Berta,’ said the soft voice of Picotee again, ‘may I come in?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Ethelberta. ‘Has everything gone right with the house this evening?’

‘Yes; and Gwendoline went out just now to buy a few things, and she is going to call round upon father when he has got his dinner cleared away.’

‘I hope she will not stay and talk to the other servants. Some day she will let drop something or other before father can stop her.’

‘Oh, Berta!’ said Picotee, close beside her. She

was kneeling in front of the couch, and now flinging her arm across Ethelberta's shoulder and shaking violently, she pressed her forehead against her sister's temple, and breathed out upon her cheek :

‘I came in again to tell you something which I ought to have told you just now, and I have come to say it at once because I am afraid I shan't be able to to-morrow. Mr. Julian was the young man I spoke to you of a long time ago, and I should have told you all about him, but you said he was your young man too, and—and I didn't know what to do then, because I thought it was wrong in me to love your young man ; and Berta, he didn't mean me to love him at all, but I did it myself, though I did not want to do it, either ; it would come to me ! And I didn't know he belonged to you when I began it, or I would not have let him meet me at all ; no I wouldn't !’

‘Meet you ? You don't mean to say he used to meet you ?’ whispered Ethelberta.

‘Yes,’ said Picotee ; ‘but he could not help it. We used to meet on the road, and there was no other road unless I had gone ever so far round. But it is worse than that, Berta ! That was why I couldn't bide in Sandbourne, and, and ran away to you up here ; it was not because I wanted to see you, Berta, but because I—I wanted——’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ said Ethelberta hurriedly.

‘And then when I went downstairs he mistook

me for you for a moment, and that caused—a confusion !’

‘ Oh well, it does not much matter,’ said Ethelberta, kissing Picotee soothingly. ‘ You ought not of course to have come to London in such a manner ; but, since you have come, we will make the best of it. Perhaps it may end happily for you and for him. Who knows ? ’

‘ Then don’t you want him, Berta ? ’

‘ Oh, no ; not at all ! ’

‘ What—and don’t you *really* want him, Berta ? ’ repeated Picotee, starting up.

‘ I would much rather he paid his addresses to you. He is not the sort of man I should wish to—think it best to marry, even if I were to marry, which I have no intention of doing at present. He calls to see me because we are old friends, but his calls do not mean anything more than that he takes an interest in me. It is not at all likely that I shall see him again ! and I certainly never shall see him unless you are present.’

‘ That will be very nice.’

‘ Yes. And you will be always distant towards him, and go to leave the room when he comes, when I will call you back ; but suppose we continue this to-morrow ? I can tell you better then what to do.’

When Picotee had left her the second time, Ethelberta turned over upon her breast and shook in convul-

sive sobs which had little relationship with tears. This abandonment ended as suddenly as it had begun—not lasting more than a minute and half altogether—and she got up in an unconsidered and unusual impulse to seek relief from the stinging sarcasm of this event—the unhappy love of Picotee—by mentioning something of it to another member of the family, her eldest sister Gwendoline, who was a woman full of sympathy.

Ethelberta descended to the kitchen, it being now about ten o'clock. The room was empty, Gwendoline not having yet returned, and Cornelia being busy about her own affairs upstairs. The French family had gone to the theatre, and the house on that account was very quiet to-night. Ethelberta sat down in the dismal place without turning up the gas, and in a few minutes admitted Gwendoline.

The round-faced country cook floundered in, untying her bonnet as she came, laying it down on a chair, and talking at the same time. ‘Such a place as this London is, to be sure!’ she exclaimed, turning on the gas till it whistled. ‘I wish I was down in Wessex again. Lord-a-mercy, Berta, I didn’t see it was you! I thought it was Cornelia. As I was saying, I thought that, after biding in this underground cellar all the week, making up messes for them French folk and never pleasing ’em, and never shall, because I don’t understand that line, I thought I would go out and see father, you know.’

‘Is he very well?’ said Ethelberta.

‘Yes; and he is going to call round when he has time. Well, as I was a-coming home-along I thought, “Please the Lord I’ll have some chippols for supper just for a plain trate,” and I went round to the late green-grocer’s for ’em; and do you know they swore me down that they hadn’t got such things as chippols in the shop, and had never heard of ’em in their lives. At last I said, “Why, how can you tell me such a brazen story?—here they be, heaps of ’em!” It made me so vexed that I came away there and then, and wouldn’t have one—no, not at a gift.’

‘They call them young onions here,’ said Ethelberta quietly; ‘you must always remember that. But, Gwendoline, I wanted——’

Ethelberta felt sick at heart, and stopped. She had come down on the wings of an impulse to unfold her trouble about Picotee to her hard-headed and much older sister, less for advice than to get some heart-ease by interchange of words; but alas, she could proceed no further. The wretched homeliness of Gwendoline’s mind seemed at this particular juncture to be absolutely intolerable, and Ethelberta was suddenly convinced that to involve Gwendoline in any such discussion would simply be increasing her own burden, and adding worse confusion to her sister’s already confused existence.

‘What were you going to say?’ said the honest and unsuspecting Gwendoline.

‘I will put it off until to-morrow,’ Ethelberta murmured gloomily; ‘I have a bad headache, and I am afraid I cannot stay with you after all.’

As she ascended the stairs, Ethelberta ached with an added pain not much less than the primary one which had brought her down. It was that old sense of disloyalty to her class and kin by feeling as she felt now which caused the pain, and there was no escaping it. Gwendoline would have gone to the ends of the earth for her: she could not confide a thought to Gwendoline!

‘If she only knew of that unworthy feeling of mine, how she would grieve,’ said Ethelberta miserably.

She next went up to the servants’ bedrooms, and to where Cornelia slept. On Ethelberta’s entry Cornelia looked up from a perfect wonder of a bonnet, which she held in her hands. At sight of Ethelberta the look of keen interest in her work changed to one of gaiety.

‘I am so glad—I was just coming down,’ Cornelia said in a whisper; whenever they spoke as relations in this house it was in whispers. ‘Now, how do you think this bonnet will do? May I come down, and see how I look in your big glass?’ She clapped the bonnet upon her head. ‘Won’t it do beautiful for Sunday afternoon?’

‘It looks very attractive, as far as I can see by this light,’ said Ethelberta. ‘But is it not rather too brilliant in colour—blue and red together, like that? Remember, as I often tell you, people in town never wear such bright contrasts as they do in the country.’

‘O, Berta!’ said Cornelia, in a deprecating tone; ‘don’t object. If there’s one thing I do glory in it is a nice flare-up about my head o’ Sundays—of course if the family’s not in mourning, I mean.’ But, seeing that Ethelberta did not smile, she turned the subject, and added docilely: ‘Did you come up for me to do anything? I will put off finishing my bonnet if I am wanted.’

‘I was going to talk to you about family matters, and Pictoe,’ said Ethelberta. ‘But, as you are busy, and I have a headache, I will put it off till to-morrow.’

Cornelia seemed decidedly relieved, for family matters were far from attractive at the best of times; and Ethelberta went down to the next floor, and entered her mother’s room.

After a short conversation Mrs. Chickerel said, ‘You say you want to ask me something?’

‘Yes; but nothing of importance, mother. I was thinking about Picotee, and what would be the best thing to do——’

‘Ah, well you may, Berta. I am so uneasy about this life you have led us into, and full of fear that your plans may break down; if they do, whatever will

become of us! I know you are doing your best; but I cannot help thinking that the coming to London and living with you was wild and rash, and not well weighed afore we set about it. You should have counted the cost first, and not advised it. If you break down, and we are all discovered living so queer and unnatural, right in the heart of the aristocracy, we should be the laughing-stock of the country: it would kill me, and ruin us all—utterly ruin us!’

‘Oh, mother, I know all that so well!’ exclaimed Ethelberta, tears of anguish filling her eyes. ‘Don’t depress me more than I depress myself by such fears, or you will bring about the very thing we strive to avoid! My only chance is in keeping in good spirits; and why don’t you try to help me a little by taking a brighter view of things?’

‘I know I ought to, my dear girl, but I cannot. I do so wish that I had never let you tempt me and the children away from the Lodge. I cannot think why I allowed myself to be so persuaded—cannot think! You are not to blame—it is I. I am much older than you, and ought to have known better than listen to such a scheme. This undertaking seems too big—the bills frighten me. I have never been used to such wild adventure, and I can’t sleep at night for fear that your tale-telling will go wrong, and we shall all be exposed and shamed. A story-teller seems such an impossible castle-in-the-air sort of a trade for getting a living by

—I cannot think how ever you came to dream of such an unheard-of thing.'

'But it is *not* a castle in the air, and it *does* get a living!' said Ethelberta, her lip quivering.

'Well, yes, while it is just a new thing; but I am afraid it cannot last—that's what I fear. People will find you out as one of a family of servants, and their pride will be stung at having gone to hear your romancing; then they will go no more, and what will happen to us and the poor little ones?'

'We must all scatter again!'

'If we could get as we were once, I wouldn't mind that. But we shall have lost our character as simple country folk who know nothing, which are the only class of poor people that squires will give any help to; and I much doubt if the girls would get places after such a discovery—it would be so awkward and unheard-of.'

'Well, all I can say is,' replied Ethelberta, 'that I will do my best. All that I have is theirs and yours as much as mine, and these arrangements are simply on their account. I don't like my relations being my servants; but if they did not work for me, they would have to work for others, and my service is much lighter and pleasanter than any other lady's would be for them, so the advantages are worth the risk. If I stood alone I would go and hide my head in any hole, and care no more about the world and its ways. I wish I

was well out of it, and at the bottom of a quiet grave—anybody might have the world for me then ! But don't let me disturb you longer ; it is getting late.'

Ethelberta then wished her mother good-night, and went away. To attempt confidences on such an ethereal matter as love was now absurd ; her hermit spirit was doomed to dwell apart as usual ; and she applied herself to deep thinking without aid and alone. Not only was there Picotee's misery to disperse ; it became imperative to consider how best to overpass a more general catastrophe.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE (*continued*)—THE BRITISH
MUSEUM.

MRS. CHICKEREL, in deploring the risks of their present speculative mode of life, was far from imagining that signs of the foul future so much dreaded were actually apparent to Ethelberta at the time the lament was spoken. Hence the daughter's uncommon sensitiveness to prophecy. It was as if a dead-reckoner poring over his chart should remark that breakers were possible ahead to one who already beheld them.

That her story-telling would prove so attractive Ethelberta had not ventured to expect for a moment when she first originated the undertaking; that having once proved attractive there should be any falling-off until such time had elapsed as would enable her to harvest some solid fruit by her labour was equally a surprise. Future expectations are often based without hesitation upon one happy accident, when the only similar condition remaining to subsequent sets of circumstances is that the same person forms the centre of them. Her situation was so peculiar, and so unlike

that of most public people, that there was hardly an argument explaining this triumphant opening which could be used in a fair calculation as to its close; unless, indeed, more strategy were employed in the conduct of the campaign than Ethelberta seemed to show at present.

There was no denying that she commanded less attention than at first: the audience had lessened, and, judging by appearances, might soon be expected to be decidedly thin. In excessive lowness of spirit, Ethelberta translated these signs with the bias that a lingering echo of her mother's dismal words naturally induced, reading them as conclusive evidence that her adventure had been chimerical in its birth. Yet it was very far less conclusive than she supposed. Public interest might without doubt have been renewed after a due interval, some of the falling-off being only an accident of the season. Her novelties had been hailed with pleasure the rather that their freshness tickled than that their intrinsic merit was appreciated; and, like many inexperienced dispensers of a unique charm, Ethelberta, by bestowing too liberally and too frequently, was destroying the very element upon which its popularity depended. Her entertainment had been good in its conception, and partly good in its execution; yet her success had but little to do with that goodness. Indeed, what might be called its badness in a histrionic sense—that is, her look sometimes of being out of place,

the sight of a beautiful woman on a platform, revealing tender airs of domesticity which showed her to belong by character to a quiet drawing-room—had been primarily an attractive feature. But alas, custom was staling this by improving her up to the mark of an utter impersonator, thereby eradicating the pretty abashments of a poetess out of her sphere; and more than one well-wisher who observed Ethelberta from afar feared that it might some day come to be said of her that she had

Enfeoffed herself to popularity :
That, being daily swallow'd by men's eyes,
They surfeited with honey, and began
To loathe the taste of sweetness, whereof a little
More than a little is by much too much.

But this in its extremity was not quite yet.

We discover her one day, a little after this time, sitting before a table strewn with accounts and bills from different tradesmen of the neighbourhood, which she examined with a pale face, collecting their totals on a blank sheet. Picotee came into the room, but Ethelberta took no notice whatever of her. The younger sister, who subsisted on scraps of notice and favour, like a dependent animal, even if these were only an occasional glance of the eye, could not help saying at last, 'Berta, how silent you are. I don't think you know I am in the room.'

‘I did not observe you,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I am very much engaged: these bills have to be paid.’

‘What, and cannot we pay them?’ said Picotee, in vague alarm.

‘Oh yes, I can pay them. The question is, how long shall I be able to do it.’

‘That is sad; and we are going on so nicely, too. It is not true that you have really decided to leave off story-telling now the people don’t crowd to hear it as they did?’

‘I think I shall leave off.’

‘And begin again next year?’

‘That is very doubtful.’

‘I’ll tell you what you might do,’ said Picotee, her face kindling with a sense of great originality. ‘You might travel about to country towns and tell your story splendidly.’

‘A man in my position might perhaps do it with impunity; but I could not without losing ground in other domains. A woman may drive to Mayfair from her house in Connaught Crescent, and speak from a platform there, and be supposed to do it as an original way of amusing herself; but when it comes to starring in the provinces she establishes herself as a woman of a different breed and habit. I wish I were a man! I would give up this house, advertise it to be let furnished, and sally forth with confidence. But I am driven to think of other ways to manage than that.’

Picotee fell into a conjectural look, but could not guess.

‘The way of marriage,’ said Ethelberta. ‘Otherwise perhaps the poetess may live to become what Dryden called himself when he got old and poor—a rent-charge on Providence. . . . Yes, I must try that way,’ she continued, with a sarcasm towards people out of hearing. ‘I must buy a “Peerage” for one thing, and a “Baronetage,” and a “House of Commons,” and a “Landed Gentry,” and learn what people are about me. I must go to Doctors’ Commons and read up wills of the parents of any likely gudgeons I may know. I must get a Herald to invent an escutcheon of my family, and throw a genealogical tree into the bargain in consideration of my taking a few second-hand heirlooms of a pawnbroking friend of his. I must get up sham ancestors, and find out some notorious name to start my pedigree from. It does not matter what his character was: either villain or martyr will do, provided that he lived five hundred years ago. It would be considered far more creditable to make good my descent from Satan in the age when he went to and fro on the earth than from a ministering angel under Victoria.’

‘But, Berta, you are not going to marry any stranger who may turn up?’ said Picotee, who had creeping sensations of dread when Ethelberta talked like this.

‘I had no such intention. But, having once put my hand to the plough, how shall I turn back?’

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‘You might marry Mr. Ladywell,’ said Picotee, who preferred a return to the concrete.

‘Yes, marry him villanously; in cold blood, without a moment to prepare himself.’

‘Ah, you won’t!’

‘I am not so sure about that. I have brought mother and the children to town against her judgment and against my father’s; they gave way to my opinion as to one who from superior education has larger knowledge of the world than they. I must prove my promises, even if Heaven should fall upon me for it, or what a miserable future will theirs be! We must not be poor in London. Poverty in the country is a sadness, but poverty in town is a horror. There is something not without grandeur in the thought of starvation on an open mountain or in a wide wood, and your bones lying there to bleach in the pure sun and rain; but a back garret in Clare Market, and the other starvers in the room insisting on keeping the window shut—anything to deliver us from that!’

‘How gloomy you can be, Berta. It will never be so dreadful. Why, I can take in plain sewing, and you can do translations, and mother can knit stockings, and so on. How much longer will this house be yours?’

‘Two years. If I keep it longer than that I shall have to pay rent at the rate of three hundred a year. The Petherwin estate provides me with it till then, which will be the end of Lady Petherwin’s term.’

‘I see it; and you ought to marry before the house is gone, if you mean to marry high,’ murmured Picotee in an inadequate voice, as one in a world so tragic that any hope of her assisting therein was out of the question.

It was not long after this exposition of the family affairs that Christopher called upon them; but Picotee was not present, having gone to think of superhuman work on the spur of Ethelberta’s awakening talk. There was something new in the way in which Ethelberta received the announcement of his name; passion had to do with it, so had circumspection; the latter most, for the first time since their re-union.

‘I am going to leave this part of England,’ said Christopher, after a few gentle preliminaries. ‘I was one of the applicants for the post of assistant organist at Melchester Cathedral when it became vacant, and I find I am likely to be chosen, through the interest of one of my father’s friends.’

‘I congratulate you.’

‘No, Ethelberta, it is not worth that. I did not originally mean to follow this course at all; but events seemed to point to it in the absence of a better.’

‘I too am compelled to follow a course I did not originally mean to take.’ After saying no more for a few moments, she added, in a tone of sudden openness, a richer tincture creeping up her cheek, ‘I want to put a question to you boldly—not exactly a question—a thought. Have you considered whether the relations

between us which have lately prevailed are—are the best for you—and for me?’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Christopher, hastily anticipating all that she might be going to say; ‘and I am glad you have given me the opportunity of speaking upon that subject. It has been very good and considerate in you to allow me to share your society so frequently as you have done since I have been in town, and to think of you as an object to exist for and strive for. But I ought to have remembered that, since you have nobody at your side to look after your interests, it behoved me to be doubly careful. In short, Ethelberta, I am not in a position to marry, nor can I discern when I shall be, and I feel it would be an injustice to ask you to be bound in any way to one lower and less talented than you. You cannot, from what you say, think it desirable that the engagement should continue. I have no right to ask you to be my betrothed, without having a near prospect of making you my wife. I don’t mind saying this straight out—I have no fear that you will doubt my love; thank Heaven, you know what that is well enough! However, as things are, I wish you to know that I cannot conscientiously put in a claim upon your attention.’

A second meaning was written in Christopher’s look, though he scarcely uttered it. A woman so delicately poised upon the social globe could not in honour be asked to wait for a lover who was unable to set bounds

to the waiting period. Yet he had privily dreamed of an approach to that position—an unreserved, ideally perfect declaration from Ethelberta that time and practical issues were nothing to her; that she would stand as fast without material hopes as with them; that love was to be an end with her henceforth, having utterly ceased to be a means. Therefore this surreptitious hope of his, founded on no reasonable expectation, was like a guilty thing surprised when Ethelberta answered, with a predominance of judgment over passion still greater than before:

‘It is unspeakably generous in you to put it all before me so nicely, Christopher. I think infinitely more of you for being so unreserved. especially since I too have been thinking much on the indefiniteness of the days to come. We are not numbered among the blest few who can afford to trifle with the time. Yet to agree to anything like a positive parting will be quite unnecessary. You did not mean that, did you? for it is harsh if you did.’ Ethelberta smiled kindly as she said this, as much as to say that she was far from really upbraiding him. ‘Let it be only that we will see each other less. We will bear one another in mind as deeply attached friends if not as definite lovers, and keep up friendly remembrances of a sort which, come what may, will never have to be ended by any painful process termed breaking off. Different persons, different natures; and it may be that marriage would not be

the most favourable atmosphere for our old affection to prolong itself in. When do you leave London?’

The disconnected query seemed to be subjoined to disperse the crude effect of what had gone before.

‘I hardly know,’ murmured Christopher. ‘I suppose I shall not call here again.’

Whilst they were silent somebody entered the room softly, and they turned to discover Picotee.

‘Come here, Picotee,’ said Ethelberta.

Picotee came with an abashed bearing to where the other two were standing, and looked down stedfastly.

‘Mr. Julian is going away,’ she continued, with determined firmness. ‘He will not see us again for a long time.’ And Ethelberta added, in a lower tone, though still in the unflinching manner of one who had set herself to say a thing, and would say it—‘He is not to be definitely engaged to me any longer. We are not thinking of marrying, you know, Picotee. It is best that we should not.’

‘Perhaps it is,’ said Christopher, hurriedly, taking up his hat. ‘Let me now wish you good-bye; and, of course, you will always know where I am—and how to find me.’

It was a tender time. He inclined forward that Ethelberta might give him her hand, which she did; whereupon their eyes met. Mastered by an impelling instinct she had not reckoned with, Ethelberta presented her cheek. Christopher kissed it faintly. Tears



IT WAS A TENDER TIME.

were in Ethelberta's eyes now, and she was heartfull of many emotions. Placing her arm round Picotee's waist, who had never lifted her eyes from the carpet, she drew the slight girl forward, and whispered quickly to him—'Kiss her, too. She is my sister, and I am yours.'

It seemed all right and natural to their respective moods and the tone of the moment that free old Wessex manners should prevail, and Christopher stooped and dropped upon Picotee's cheek likewise such a farewell kiss as he had imprinted upon Ethelberta's.

'Care for us both equally!' said Ethelberta.

'I will,' said Christopher, scarcely knowing what he said.

When he had reached the door of the room, he looked back and saw the two sisters standing as he had left them, and equally tearful. Ethelberta at once said, in a last futile struggle against letting him go altogether, and with thoughts of her sister's heart:

'I think that Picotee might correspond with Faith; don't you, Mr. Julian? They know each other.'

'My sister would much like to do so,' said he.

'And you would like it too, would you not, Picotee?'

'Oh, yes,' she replied. 'And I can tell them all about you.'

'Then it shall be so, if Miss Julian will.' She

spoke in a settled way, as if something intended had been set in train; and Christopher having promised for his sister, he went out of the house with a parting smile of misgiving.

He could scarcely believe as he walked along that those late words, yet hanging in his ears, had really been spoken, that still visible scene enacted. He could not even recollect for a minute or two how the final result had been produced. Did he himself first enter upon the long-looming theme, or did she? Christopher had been so nervously alive to the urgency of setting before the hard-striving woman a clear outline of himself, his surroundings and his fears, that he fancied the main impulse to this consummation had been his, notwithstanding that a faint initiative had come from Ethelberta. All had completed itself quickly, uncereemoniously, and easily. Ethelberta had let him go a second time; yet on foregoing mornings and evenings, when contemplating the necessity of some such explanation, it had seemed that nothing less than Atlantean force could overpower their mutual gravitation towards each other again.

On his reaching home Faith was not in the house, and, in the restless state which demands something to talk at, the musician went off to find her, well knowing her haunt at this time of the day. He entered the spiked and gilded gateway of the Museum hard by, turned to the wing devoted to sculptures, and descended

to a particular basement room, which was lined with bas-reliefs from Nineveh. The place was cool, silent, and soothing; it was empty, save of a little figure in black, that was standing with its face to the wall in an innermost nook. This spot was Faith's own temple; here, among these deserted antiques, Faith was always happy. Christopher looked on at her for some time before she noticed him, and dimly perceived how vastly differed her homely suit and unstudied contour—painfully unstudied to fastidious eyes—from Ethelberta's well-arranged draperies, even from Picotee's clever bits of ribbon, by which she made herself look pretty out of nothing at all. Yet this negligence was his sister's essence; without it she would have been a spoilt product. She had no outer world, and her rusty black was as appropriate to Faith's unseen courses as were Ethelberta's correct lights and shades to her more prominent career.

‘Look, Kit,’ said Faith, as soon as she knew who was approaching, ‘This is a thing I never learnt before; this person is really Sennacherib, sitting on his throne; and these with fluted beards and hair like plough-furrows, and fingers with no bones in them, are his warriors—really carved at the time, you know. Only just think that this is not imagined of Assyria, but done in Assyrian times by Assyrian hands. Don't you feel as if you were actually in Nineveh; that as

we now walk between these slabs, so walked Ninevites between them once?’

‘Yes Faith, it is all over. Ethelberta and I have parted.’

‘Indeed. And so my plan is to think of verses in the Bible about Sennacherib and his doings, which resemble these; this verse, for instance, I remember: “Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah did Sennacherib, King of Assyria, come up against all the fenced cities of Judah and took them. And Hezekiah, King of Judah, sent to the King of Assyria to Lachish,” and so on. Well, there it actually is, you see. There’s Sennacherib, and there’s Lachish. Is it not glorious to think that this is a picture done at the time of those very events?’

‘Yes. We did not quarrel this time, Ethelberta and I. If I may so put it, it is worse than quarrelling. We felt it was no use going on any longer, and so—Come, Faith, hear what I say, or else tell me that you won’t hear, and that I may as well save my breath!’

‘Yes, I will really listen,’ she said, fluttering her eyelids in her concern at having been so abstracted, and excluding Sennacherib there and then from Christopher’s affairs by the firm settlement of her features to a present-day aspect, and her eyes upon his face. ‘You said you had seen Ethelberta. Yes, and what did she say?’

‘Was there ever anybody so provoking! Why, I have just told you!’

‘Yes, yes; I remember now. You have parted. The subject is too large for me to know all at once what I think of it, and you must give me time, Kit. Speaking of Ethelberta reminds me of what I have done. I just looked into the Academy this morning—I thought I would surprise you by telling you about it. And what do you think I saw? Ethelberta—in the picture painted by Mr. Ladywell.’

‘It is never hung?’ said he, feeling that they were at one as to a topic at last.

‘Yes. And the subject is an Elizabethan knight parting from a lady of the same period—the words explaining the picture being—

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know’st thy estimate.

The lady is Ethelberta, to the shade of a hair—her living face; and the knight is——’

‘Not Ladywell?’

‘I think so; I am not sure.’

‘No wonder I am dismissed! And yet she hates him. Well, come along, Faith. Women allow strange liberties in these days.’

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ROYAL ACADEMY—THE HAREFIELD ESTATE.

ETHELBERTA was a firm believer in the kindly effects of artistic education upon the masses. She held that defilement of mind often arose from ignorance of eye; and her philanthropy being, by the simple force of her situation, of that sort which lingers in the neighbourhood of home, she concentrated her efforts in this kind upon Sol and Dan. Accordingly, the Academy exhibition having now just opened, she ordered the brothers to appear in their best clothes at the entrance to Burlington House just after noontide on the Saturday of the first week, this being the only day and hour at which they could attend without 'losing a half,' and therefore it was necessary to put up with the inconvenience of arriving at a crowded and enervating time.

When Ethelberta was set down in the quadrangle she perceived the faithful pair, big as the Zamzummims of old time, standing like sentinels in the particular corner that she had named to them: for Sol and Dan

would as soon have attempted petty larceny as broken faith with their admired lady-sister Ethelberta. They welcomed her with a painfully lavish exhibition of large new gloves, and chests covered with broad triangular areas of padded blue silk, occupying the position that the shirt-front had occupied in earlier days, and supposed to be lineally descended from the tie of a neckerchief.

The dress of their sister for to-day was exactly that of a respectable workman's relative who had no particular ambition in the matter of fashion—a black stuff gown, a plain bonnet to match. A veil she wore for obvious reasons: her face was getting well known in London, and it had already appeared at the private view in an uncovered state, when it was scrutinised more than the paintings around. But now homely and useful labour was her purpose.

Catalogue in hand she took the two brothers through the galleries, teaching them in whispers as they walked, and occasionally correcting them—first, for too reverential a bearing towards the well-dressed crowd, among whom they persisted in walking with their hats in their hands and with the generally contrite bearing of meek people in church; and, secondly, for a tendency which they too often showed towards straying from the contemplation of the pictures as art to indulge in curious speculations on the intrinsic nature of the delineated subject, the gilding of the frames, the

construction of the skylights overhead, or admiration for the bracelets, locket, and lofty eloquence of persons around them.

‘Now,’ said Ethelberta, in a warning whisper, ‘we are coming near the picture which was partly painted from myself. And, Dan, when you see it, don’t you exclaim “Hullo!” or “That’s Berta to a T,” or anything at all. It would not matter were it not dangerous for me to be noticed here to-day. I see several people who would recognise me on the least provocation.’

‘Not a word,’ said Dan. ‘Don’t you be afraid about that. I feel that I baint upon my own ground to-day; and wouldn’t do anything to cause an upset, drown me if I would. Would you, Sol?’

In this temper they all pressed forward, and Ethelberta could not but be gratified at the reception of Ladywell’s picture, though it was accorded by critics not very profound. It was an operation of some minutes to get exactly opposite, and when side by side the three stood there they overheard the immediate reason of the pressure. ‘Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing’ had been lengthily discoursed upon that morning by the Coryphæus of popular opinion; and the spirit having once been poured out sons and daughters could prophesy. But, in truth, Ladywell’s work, if not emphatically original, was happily centred on a middle stratum of taste, and apart from this ad-

ventitious help commanded, and deserved to command, a wide area of appreciation.

While they were standing here in the very heart of the throng Ethelberta's ears were arrested by two male voices behind her, whose words formed a novel contrast to those of the other speakers around.

'Some men, you see, with extravagant expectations of themselves, coolly get them gratified, while others hope rationally and are disappointed. Luck, that's what it is. And the more easily a man takes life the more persistently does luck follow him.'

'Of course; because, if he's industrious he does not want luck's assistance. Natural laws will help him instead.'

'Well, if it is true that Ladywell has painted a good picture he has done it by an exhaustive process. He has painted every possible bad one till nothing more of that sort is left for him. You know what lady's face served as the original to this, I suppose?'

'Mrs. Petherwin's, I hear.'

'Yes, Mrs. Alfred Neigh that's to be.'

'What, that elusive fellow caught at last?'

'So it appears; but she herself is hardly so well secured as yet, it seems, though he takes the uncertainty as coolly as possible. I knew nothing about it till he introduced the subject as we were standing here on Monday, and said, in an off-hand way, "I mean to marry that lady." I asked him how. "Easily," he

said; "I will have her if there are a hundred at her heels." You will understand that this was quite in confidence.'

'Of course, of course.' Then there was a slight laugh, and the companions proceeded to other gossip.

Ethelberta, calm and compressed in manner, sidled along to extricate herself, not daring to turn round, and Dan and Sol followed, till they were all clear of the spot. The brothers, who had heard the words equally well with Ethelberta, made no remark to her upon them, assuming that they referred to some peculiar system of courtship adopted in high life, with which they had rightly no concern.

Ethelberta ostensibly continued her business of tutoring the young workmen just as before, though every emotion in her had been put on the alert by this discovery. She had known that Neigh admired her; yet his presumption in uttering such a remark as he was reported to have uttered, confidentially or otherwise, nearly took away her breath. Perhaps it was not altogether disagreeable to have her breath so taken away.

'I mean to marry that lady.' She whispered the words to herself twenty times in the course of the afternoon. Sol and Dan were left considerably longer to their private perceptions of the false and true in art than they had been earlier in the day.

When she reached home Ethelberta was still far-

removed in her reflections: and it was noticed afterwards that about this time in her career her openness of manner entirely deserted her. She mostly was silent as to her thoughts, and she wore an air of unusual stillness. It was the silence and stillness of a starry sky, where all is force and motion. This deep undecipherable habit sometimes suggested, though it did not reveal, Ethelberta's busy brain to her sisters, and they said to one another, 'I cannot think what's coming to Berta: she is not so nice as she used to be.'

The evening under notice was passed desultorily enough after the discovery of Neigh's self-assured statement. Among other things that she did after dark, while still musingly examining the probabilities of the report turning out true, was to wander to the large attic where the children slept, a frequent habit of hers at night to learn if they were snug and comfortable. They were talking now from bed to bed, the person under discussion being herself. Herself seemed everywhere to-day.

'I know that she is a fairy,' Myrtle was insisting, 'because she must be, to have such pretty things in her house, and wear silk dresses such as mother and we and Picotee haven't got, and have money to give us whenever we want it.'

'Emmeline says perhaps she knows the fairy's god-mother, and is not a fairy herself, because Berta is too tall for a real fairy.'

‘She must be one; for when there was a notch burnt in the hem of my pretty blue frock she said it should be gone in the morning if I would go to bed and not cry; and in the morning it was gone, and all nice and straight as new.’

Ethelberta was recalling to mind how she had sat up and repaired the damage alluded to by cutting off half an inch of the skirt all round and hemming it anew, when the breathing of the children became regular, and they fell asleep. Here were bright little minds ready for a training, which without money and influence she could never give them. The wisdom which knowledge brings, and the power which wisdom may bring, she had always assumed would be theirs in her dreams for their social elevation. By what means were these things to be ensured to them if her skill in bread-winning should fail her? Would not a well-contrived marriage be of service? She covered and tucked in one more closely, lifted another upon the pillow and straightened the soft limbs to an easy position; then sat down by the window and looked out at the flashing stars. Thoughts of Neigh’s audacious statement returned again upon Ethelberta. He had said that he meant to marry her. Of what standing was the man who had uttered such an intention respecting one to whom a politic marriage had become almost a necessity of existence?

She had often heard Neigh speak indefinitely of

some estate—‘my little place’ he had called it—which he had purchased no very long time ago. All she knew was that its name was Harefield, that it lay from twenty to forty miles out of London in a south-westerly direction, a railway station in the district bearing the same name, so that there was probably a village or small town adjoining. Whether the dignity of this landed property was that of domain, farmstead, allotment, or garden-plot, Ethelberta had not the slightest conception. She was almost certain that Neigh never lived there, but that might signify nothing. The exact size and value of the estate would, she mused, be curious, interesting, and almost necessary information to her who must become mistress of it were she to allow him to carry out his singularly cool and crude, if tender, intention. Moreover, its importance would afford a very good random sample of his worldly substance throughout, from which alone, after all, could the true spirit and worth and seriousness of his words be apprehended. Impecuniosity may revel in unqualified vows and brim over with confessions as blithely as a bird of May, but such careless pleasures are not for the solvent, whose very dreams are negotiable, and are expressed with due care accordingly.

That Neigh had used the words she had far more than *primâ-facie* appearances for believing. Neigh’s own conduct towards her, though peculiar rather than devoted, found in these words alone a reasonable key.

But, supposing the estate to be such a verbal hallucination as, for instance, hers had been at Arrowthornè, when her poor, unprogressive, hopelessly impracticable Christopher came there to visit her, and was so wonderfully undeceived about her social standing: what a *fiasco*, and what a cuckoo-cry would his utterances about marriage seem then. Christopher had often told her of his expectations from ‘Arrowthorne Lodge,’ and of the blunders that had resulted in consequence. Had not Ethelberta’s affection for Christopher partaken less of lover’s passion than of old-established tutelary tenderness she might have been reminded by this reflection of the transcendent fidelity he had shown under that trial—as severe a trial, considering the abnormal, almost morbid, development of the passion for position in present-day society, as can be prepared for men who move in the ordinary, unheroic channels of life.

By the following evening the consideration of this possibility, that Neigh’s position might furnish scope for such a disillusioning discovery by herself as hers had afforded to Christopher, decoyed Ethelberta into a curious little scheme. She was piqued into a practical undertaking by the man who could say to his friend with such *sangfroid*, ‘I mean to marry that lady.’

Merely telling Picotee to prepare for an evening excursion, of which she was to talk to no one, Ethelberta made ready likewise, and they left the house in

a cab about half an hour before sunset, and drove to the Waterloo Station.

With the decline and departure of the sun a fog gathered itself out of the low meadow land that bordered the railway as they went along towards the west, stretching over it like a placid lake, till, at the end of the journey, the mist became generally pervasive, though not dense. Avoiding observation as much as they conveniently could, the two sisters walked from the long wooden shed which formed the station here, into the rheumy air and along the road to the open country. Picotee occasionally questioned Ethelberta on the object of the strange journey: she did not question closely, being satisfied that in such sure hands as Ethelberta's she was safe.

Deeming it unwise to make any enquiry just yet beyond the simple one of the way to Harefield, Ethelberta led her companion along a newly-fenced road across a heath. In due time they came to an ornamental gate with a semicircular wall on each side, signifying the entrance to some enclosed property or other. Ethelberta, being quite free from any digested plan for encouraging Neigh in his resolve to wive, was startled to find a hope in her that this very respectable beginning before their eyes was the entrance to the Harefield property: that she hoped it was nevertheless unquestionable. Just beyond lay a turnpike-house,

where was dimly visible a woman in the act of putting up a shutter to the window looking upon the road.

Compelled by this time to come to special questions, Ethelberta instructed Picotee to ask of this person if the place they had just passed was the entrance to Harefield Park. The woman replied that it was. Directly she had gone indoors Ethelberta turned back again towards the park gate.

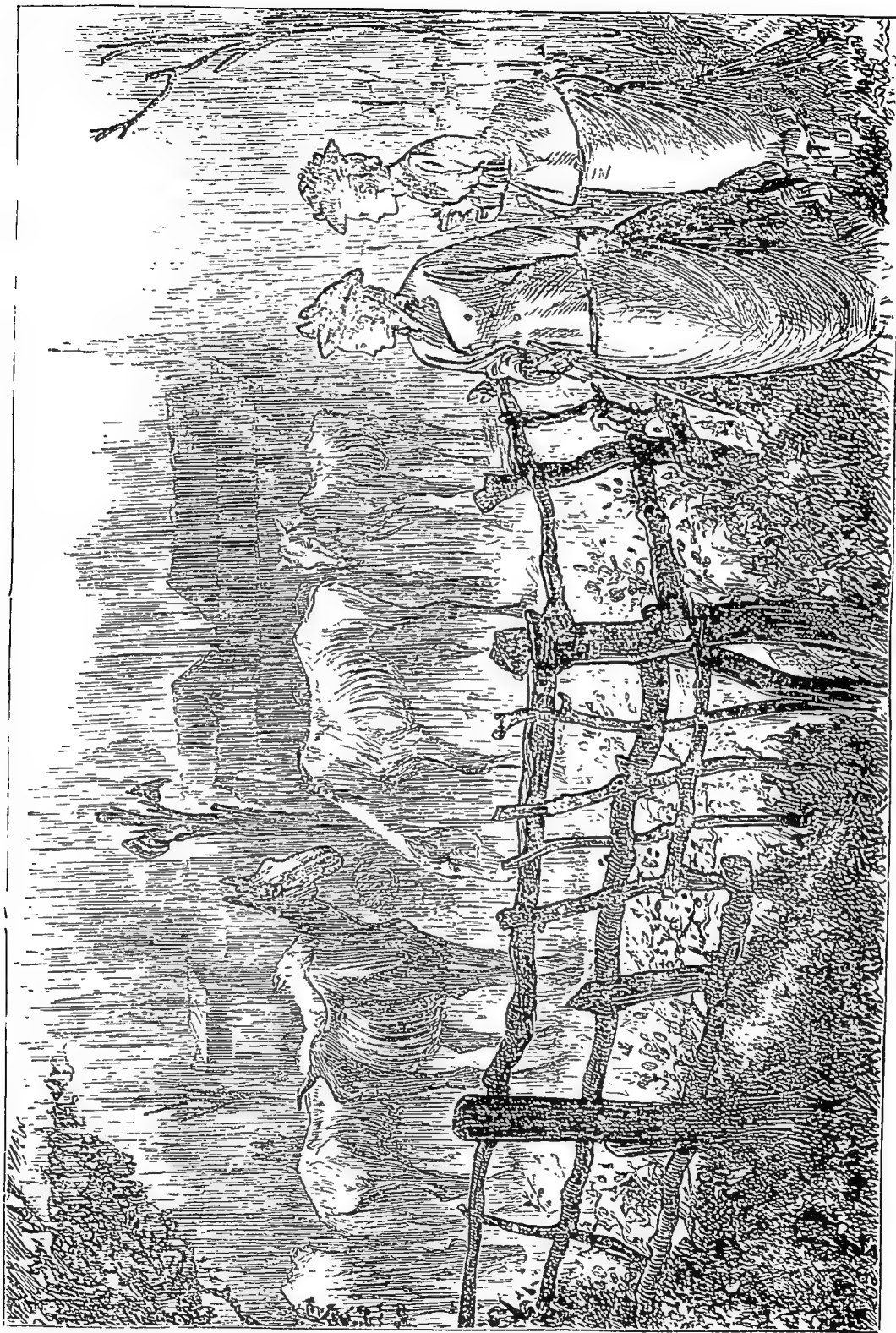
‘What have we come for, Berta?’ said Picotee, as she turned also.

‘I’ll tell you some day,’ replied her sister.

It was now much past eight o’clock, and, from the nature of the evening, dusk. The last stopping up-train was about ten, so that half an hour could well be afforded for looking round. Ethelberta went to the gate, which was found to be fastened by a chain and padlock.

‘Ah, the London season,’ she murmured.

There was a wicket at the side, and they entered. An avenue of young fir trees three or four feet in height extended from the gate into the mist, and down this they walked. The drive was not in very good order, and the two women were frequently obliged to walk on the grass to avoid the rough stones in the carriage-way. The double line of young firs now abruptly terminated, and the road swept lower, bending to the right, immediately in front being a large lake, calm and silent as a second sky. They could



THE HAREFIELD ESTATE.

hear from somewhere on the margin the purl of a weir, and around were clumps of shrubs, araucarias and deodars being the commonest.

Ethelberta could not resist being charmed with the repose of the spot, and hastened on with curiosity to reach the other side of the pool, where, by every law of manorial topography, the mansion would be situate. The fog concealed all objects beyond a distance of twenty yards or thereabouts, but it was nearly full moon, and though the orb was hidden, a pale diffused light enabled them to see objects in the foreground. Reaching the other side of the lake the drive enlarged itself most legitimately to a large oval, as for a sweep before a door, a pile of rockwork standing in the midst.

But where should have been the front door of a mansion was simply a rough rail fence, about four feet high. They drew near and looked over.

In the enclosure, and on the site of the imaginary house, was an extraordinary group. It consisted of numerous horses in the last stage of decrepitude, the animals being such mere skeletons that at first Ethelberta hardly recognised them to be horses at all; they seemed rather to be specimens of some attenuated heraldic animal, scarcely thick enough through the body to cast a shadow; or enlarged castings of the fire-dog of past times. These poor creatures were endeavouring to make a meal from herbage so trodden and thin that

scarcely a wholesome blade remained; the little that there was consisted of the sourer sorts common on such sandy soils, mingled with tufts of heather and sprouting ferns.

‘Why have we come here, dear Berta?’ said Picotee, shuddering.

‘I hardly know,’ said Ethelberta.

Adjoining this enclosure was another and smaller one, formed of high boarding, within which appeared to be some sheds and outhouses. Ethelberta looked through the crevices, and saw that in the midst of the yard stood trunks of trees as if they were growing, with branches also extending, but these were sawn off at the points where they began to be flexible, no twigs or boughs remaining. Each torso was not unlike a huge hat-stand, and suspended to the pegs and prongs were lumps of some substance which at first she did not recognise; they proved to be a chronological sequel to the previous scene. Horses’ skulls, ribs, quarters, legs, and other joints were hung thereon, the whole forming a huge open-air larder emitting not too sweet a smell.

But what Stygian sound was this? There had arisen at the moment upon the mute and sleepy air a varied howling from a hundred tongues. It had burst from a spot close at hand—a low wooden building by a stream which fed the lake—and reverberated for miles. No further explanation was required.

‘We are close to a kennel of hounds,’ said Ethelberta, as Picotee held tightly to her arm. ‘They cannot get out, so you need not fear. They have a horrid way of suddenly beginning thus at different hours of the night, for no apparent reason: though perhaps they hear us. These poor horses are waiting to be killed for their food.’

The experience altogether, from its intense melancholy, was very depressing, almost appalling to the two lone young women, and they quickly retraced their footsteps. The pleasant lake, the purl of the weir, the rudimentary lawns, shrubberies, and avenue, had changed their character quite. Ethelberta fancied at that moment that she could not have married Neigh, even had she loved him, so horrid did his belongings appear to be. But for many other reasons she had been gradually feeling within this hour that she would not go out of her way at a beck from a man whose interest was so unimpassioned.

Thinking no more of him as a possible husband she ceased to be afraid to make enquiries about the peculiarities of his possessions. In the high road they came upon a local man, resting from wheeling a wheelbarrow, and Ethelberta asked him, with the air of a countrywoman, who owned the estate across the road.

‘The man owning that is one of the name of Neigh,’ said the native, wiping his face. ‘He bought the place some time ago, and was going to build a house upon

it—in short, he went so far as to have the grounds planted, and the roads marked out, and the fish-pond made; well, then, owing to his father's goings on, he did no more. "I shall never have a wife," he said, "so why should I want a house to put her in?" He's a terrible hater of women, I hear, particularly the lower class.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes, and since then he has let the land to the Honourable Mr. Mountclere, a brother of Lord Mountclere's, and a sort of chum of Mr. Neigh's. Mr. Mountclere wanted the spot for a kennel, and as the land is too poor and sandy for cropping, Mr. Neigh let him have it. 'Tis his hounds that you hear howling.'

'What did Mr. Neigh's father do to so disgust his son?'

'Married his cook, and 'twas considered a disgrace to the family by young Neigh, who hated that one of the servant class should mix up with his blood.'

They passed on. 'Berta, why did we come down here?' said Picotee.

'To see the nakedness of the land. It was a whim only, and as it will end in nothing, it is not worth while for me to make further explanation.'

It was with a curious sense of renunciation that Ethelberta went homeward. Neigh was handsome, grim-natured, rather wicked, and an indifferentist; and these attractions interested her as a woman. But the

news of this evening suggested to Ethelberta that herself and Neigh's stepmother were too nearly cattle of one colour for a confession on the matter of lineage to be well received ; and without confidence of every sort on the nature of her situation, she was determined to contract no union at all. The sympathy of unlikeness might lead the scion of some family, hollow and fungous with antiquity, and as yet unmarked by a *mésalliance*, to be won over by her story ; but the antipathy of resemblance would be ineradicable.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ETHELBERTA'S DRAWING-ROOM.

WHILE Ethelberta during the next few days was dismissing that evening journey from her consideration, as an incident altogether foreign to the organised course of her existence, the hidden fruit thereof was rounding to maturity in a species unforeseen.

Inferences unassailable as processes are, nevertheless, to be suspected from the almost certain deficiency of particulars on some side or other. The truth in relation to Neigh's supposed frigidity was brought before her at the end of the following week, when Dan and Sol had taken Picotee, Cornelia, and the young children to Kew for the afternoon.

Early that morning, hours before it was necessary, there had been such a chatter of preparation in the house as was seldom heard there. Sunday hats and bonnets had been retrimmed with such cunning that it would have taken a milliner's apprentice at least to discover that any thread in them was not quite new. There was an anxious peep through the blind at the sky at daybreak by Georgina and Myrtle, and the per-

plexity of these rural children was great at the weather-signs of town, where atmospheric effects had nothing to do with clouds, and fair days and foul came apparently quite by chance. Punctually at the hour appointed two friendly human shadows descended across the kitchen window, followed by Sol and Dan, much to the relief of the children's apprehensions that they might forget the day.

The brothers were by this time acquiring something of the air and manners of London workmen ; they were less spontaneous and more comparative ; less genial, but smarter ; in obedience to the usual law by which the emotion that takes the form of humour in country workmen becomes transmuted to irony among the same order in town. But the fixed and dogged fidelity to one another under apparent coolness, by which this family was distinguished, remained unshaken in these members as in all the rest, leading them to select the children as companions in their holiday in preference to casual acquaintance. At last they were ready, and departed, and Ethelberta, after chatting with her mother awhile, proceeded to her personal duties.

The house was very silent that day, Gwendoline and Joey being the only ones left below stairs. Ethelberta was wishing that she had thrown off her state and gone to Kew to have an hour of childhood over again in a romp with the others, when she was startled by the announcement of a male visitor—none other than Mr. Neigh.

Ethelberta's attitude on receipt of this information sufficiently expressed a revived sense that the incidence of Mr. Neigh on her path might have a meaning after all. Neigh had certainly said he was going to marry her, and now here he was come to her house—just as if he meant to do it forthwith. She had mentally discarded him; yet she felt a shock which was scarcely painful, and a dread which was almost exhilarating. Her flying visit to Harefield she thought little of at this moment. From the fact that the mind prefers imaginings to recapitulation, conjecture to history, Ethelberta had dwelt more upon Neigh's possible plans and anticipations than upon the incidents of her evening journey; and the former assumed a more distinct shape in her mind's eye than anything on the visible side of the curtain.

Neigh was perhaps not quite so placidly nonchalant as in ordinary; still, he was by far the most trying visitor that Ethelberta had lately faced, and she could not get above the stage—not a very high one for the mistress of a house—of feeling her personality to be inconveniently in the way of his eyes. He had somewhat the bearing of a man who was going to do without any fuss what gushing people would call a philanthropic action.

‘I have been intending to write a line to you,’ said Neigh; ‘but I felt that I could not be sure of writing my meaning in a way which might please you. I am

not bright at a letter—never was. The question I mean is one that I hope you will be disposed to answer favourably, even though I may show the awkwardness of a fellow—person who has never put such a question before. Will you give me a word of encouragement—just a hope that I may not be unacceptable as a husband to you? Your talents are very great; and of course I know that I have nothing at all in that way. Still people are happy together sometimes in spite of such things. Will you say “Yes,” and settle it now?’

‘I was not expecting you had come upon such an errand as this,’ said she, looking up a little, but mostly looking down. ‘I cannot say what you wish, Mr. Neigh.’

‘Perhaps I have been too sudden and presumptuous. Yes, I know I have been that. However, directly I saw you I felt that nobody ever came so near my idea of what is desirable in a lady, and it occurred to me that only one obstacle should stand in the way of the natural results, which obstacle would be your refusal. In common kindness consider. I daresay I am judged to be a man of inattentive habits—I know that’s what you think of me; but under your influence I should be very different; so pray do not let your dislike to little matters influence you.’

‘I would not indeed. But believe me there can be no discussion of marriage between us,’ said Ethelberta, decisively.

‘If that’s the case I may as well say no more. To burden you with my regrets would be out of place, I suppose,’ said Neigh, looking calmly out of the window.

‘Apart from personal feeling, there are considerations which would prevent what you contemplated,’ she murmured. ‘My affairs are too lengthy, intricate, and unpleasant for me to explain to anybody at present. And that would be a necessary first step.’

‘Not at all. I cannot think that preliminary to be necessary at all. I would put my lawyer in communication with yours, and we would leave the rest to them: I believe that is the proper way. You could say anything in confidence to your family-man; and you could enquire through him anything you might wish to know about my—about me. All you would need to say to myself are just the two little words—“I will,” in the church here at the end of the Crescent.’

‘I am sorry to pain you, Mr. Neigh—so sorry,’ said Ethelberta. ‘But I cannot say them.’ She was rather distressed that, despite her discouraging words, he still went on with his purpose, as if he imagined what she so distinctly said to be no bar, but rather a stimulant, usual under the circumstances.

‘It does not matter about paining me,’ said Neigh. ‘Don’t take that into consideration at all. But I did not expect you to leave me so entirely without help—to refuse me absolutely as far as words go—after what

you did. If it had not been for that I should never have ventured to call. I might otherwise have supposed your interest to be fixed in another quarter; but your acting in that manner encouraged me to think you could listen to a word.'

'What do you allude to?' said Ethelberta. 'How have I acted?'

Neigh appeared reluctant to go any further; but the allusion soon became sufficiently clear. 'I wish my little place at Harefield had been worthier of you,' he said brusquely. 'However, that's a matter of time only. It is useless to build a house there yet. I wish I had known that you would be looking over it at that time of the evening. A single word, when we were talking about it the other day, that you were going to be in the neighbourhood, would have been sufficient. Nothing could have given me so much delight as to have driven you round.'

He knew that she had been to Harefield: that knowledge was what had inspired him to call upon her to-day! Ethelberta breathed a sort of exclamation, not right out, but stealthily, like a parson's damn. Her face did not change, since a face must be said not to change while it preserves the same pleasant lines in the mobile parts as before; but anybody who has preserved his pleasant lines under the half-minute's peer of the invidious camera, and found what a wizened

starched kind of thing they stiffen to towards the end of the time, will understand the tendency of Ethelberta's lovely features now.

‘Yes, I walked round,’ said Ethelberta, faintly.

Neigh was decidedly master of the position at last; but he spoke as if he did not value that. His knowledge had furnished him with grounds for calling upon her, and he hastened to undeceive her from supposing that he could think ill of any motive of hers which gave him those desirable grounds.

‘I supposed you, by that, to give some little thought to me occasionally,’ he resumed, in the same slow and orderly tone. ‘How could I help thinking so? It was your doing that which encouraged me. Now, was it not natural—I put it to you?’

Ethelberta was almost exasperated at perceiving the awful extent to which she had compromised herself with this man by her impulsive visit; lightly and philosophically as he seemed to take it—as a thing, in short, which every woman would do by nature unless hindered by difficulties—it was no trifle to her as long as he was ignorant of her justification; and this she determined that he should know at once, at all hazards.

‘It was through you in the first place that I did look into your grounds,’ she said, excitedly. ‘It was your presumption that caused me to go there. I should not have thought of such a thing else. If you had not said what you did say I never should have thought

of you or Harefield either—Harefield might have been in Kamtschatka for all I cared.'

'I hope sincerely that I never said anything to disturb you.'

'Yes, you did—not to me, but to somebody,' said Ethelberta, with her eyes over-full of retained tears.

'What have I said to somebody that can be in the least objectionable to you?' enquired Neigh, with much concern.

'You said—you said, you meant to marry me—just as if I had no voice in the matter! And that annoyed me, and made me go there out of curiosity.'

Neigh changed colour a little. 'Well, I did say it: I own that I said it,' he replied at last. Probably he knew enough of her nature not to feel long disconcerted by her disclosure, however she might have become possessed of the information. The explanation was certainly a great excuse to her curiosity; but if Ethelberta had tried she could not have given him a better ground for making light of her objections to his suit. 'I felt that I must marry you, that we were predestined to marry ages ago, and I feel it still!' he continued, with listless ardour. 'You seem to regret your interest in Harefield; but to me it is a charm, and has been ever since I heard of it.'

'If you only knew all!' she said, helplessly, showing, without perceiving it, an unnecessary humility in

the remark, since there was no more reason just then that she should go into details about her life, than that he should about his. But melancholy and mistaken thoughts of herself as a counterfeit had brought her to this.

‘I do not wish to know more,’ said Neigh.

‘And would you marry any woman off-hand, without being thoroughly acquainted with her circumstances?’ she said, looking at him curiously, and with a little admiration, for his unconscionably phlegmatic treatment of her motives in going to Harefield had a not unbecoming daring about it in Ethelberta’s eye.

‘I would marry a woman off-hand when that woman is you. I would make you mine this moment did I dare; or, to speak with absolute accuracy, within twenty-four hours. Do assent to it, dear Mrs. Petherwin, and let me be sure of you for ever. I’ll drive to Doctors’ Commons this minute, and meet you to-morrow morning at nine in the church just below. It is a simple impulse, but I would adhere to it in the coolest moment. Shall it be arranged in that way, instead of our waiting through the ordinary routine of preparation? I am not a youth now, but I can see the bliss of such an act as that, and the contemptible nature of methodical proceedings beside it!’

He had taken her hand. Ethelberta gave it a subtle movement backwards to imply that he was not to retain the prize, and said, ‘One whose inner life is

almost unknown to you, and whom you have scarcely seen except at other people's houses !'

'We know each other far better than we may think at first,' said Neigh. 'We are not people to love in a hurry, and I have not done so in this case. As for worldly circumstances, the most important items in a marriage contract are the persons themselves, and, as far as I am concerned, if I get a lady fair and wise I care for nothing further. I know you are beautiful, for all London owns it; I know you are talented, for I have read your poetry and heard your romances; and I know you are politic and discreet——'

'For I have examined your property,' said she, with a weak smile.

Neigh bowed. 'And what more can I wish to know? Come, shall it be?'

'Certainly not to-morrow.'

'I would be entirely in your hands in that matter. I will not urge you to be precipitate—I could not expect you to be ready yet. My suddenness perhaps offended you; but, having thought deeply of this bright possibility, I was apt to forget the forbearance that one ought to show at first in mentioning it. If I have done wrong forgive me.'

'I will think of that,' said Ethelberta, with a cooler manner. 'But seriously, all these words are nothing to the purpose. I must remark that I prize your friendship, but it is not for me to marry now.'

You have convinced me of your goodness of heart and freedom from unworthy suspicions ; let that be enough. The best way in which I in my turn can convince you of my goodness of heart is by asking you to see me in private no more.'

'And do you refuse to think of me as——. Why do you treat me like that, after all?' said Neigh, surprised at this want of harmony with his principle that one convert to matrimony could always find a second ready-made.

'I cannot explain, I cannot explain,' said she, impatiently. 'I would and I would not—explain, I mean, not marry. I don't love anybody and I have no heart left for beginning. It is only honest in me to tell you that I am interested in watching another man's career, though that is not to the point either, for no close relationship with him is contemplated. But I do not wish to speak of this any more. Do not press me to it.'

'Certainly I will not,' said Neigh, seeing that she was distressed and sorrowful. 'But do consider me and my wishes, Mrs. Petherwin ; I have a right to ask it, for it is only asking a continuance of what you have already begun to do. To-morrow I believe I shall have the happiness of seeing you again.'

She did not say no, and long after the door had closed upon him she remained fixed in thought. 'How can he be blamed for his manner,' she said, 'after knowing what I did!'

Ethelberta as she sat felt herself much less a Petherwin than a Chickereel, much less a poetess richly freighted with fancy than an adventuress with a nebulous prospect. Neigh was one of the few men whose presence seemed to attenuate her dignity in some mysterious way to its very least proportions ; and that act of espial, which had so quickly and inexplicably come to his knowledge, helped his influence still more. She knew little of the nature of the town bachelor ; there were opaque depths in him which her thoughts had never definitely plumbed. Notwithstanding her exaltation to the atmosphere of the Petherwin family, Ethelberta was very far from having the thoroughbred London woman's knowledge of sets, grades, coteries, cliques, forms, glosses, and niceties, particularly on the masculine side. Setting the years from her infancy to her first look into town against those linking that epoch with the present, the former period covered not only the greater time, but contained the mass of her most vivid impressions of life and its ways. But in recognising her own ignorance of the ratio that words to women bear to deeds to women in the ethical code of the bachelor of the club, she forgot that human nature in the gross differs little with situation, and that a gift which, if the germs were lacking, no amount of training in clubs and coteries could supply, was mother-wit like her own.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. BELMAINE'S—CRIPPLEGATE CHURCH.

NEIGH's remark that he believed he should see Ethelberta again the next day referred to a contemplated pilgrimage of an unusual sort which had been arranged for that day by Mrs. Belmaine upon the ground of an incidental suggestion of Ethelberta's. One afternoon in the week previous they had been chatting over tea at the house of the former lady, Neigh being present as a casual caller, when the conversation was directed upon Milton by somebody opening a volume of the poet's works that lay on a table near.

‘Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee——’

said Mrs. Belmaine with the degree of flippancy which is considered correct for immortal verse, the Bible, God, &c. in these days. And Ethelberta replied, lit up by a quick remembrance, ‘It is a good time to talk of Milton; for I have been much impressed by reading the “Life;” and I have decided to go and see his tomb. Could we not all go? We ought to quicken our memories of the

great, and of where they lie, by such a visit occasionally.'

'We ought,' said Mrs. Belmaine.

'And why shouldn't we?' continued Ethelberta with interest.

'To Westminster Abbey?' said Mr. Belmaine, a common man of thirty, younger than his wife, who had lately come into the room.

'No; to where he lies comparatively alone—Cripplegate Church.'

'I always thought that Milton was buried in Poet's Corner,' said Mr. Belmaine.

'So did I,' said Neigh; 'but I have such an indifferent head for places that my thinking goes for nothing.'

'Well, it would be a pretty thing to do,' said Mrs. Belmaine, 'and instructive to all of us. If Mrs. Petherwin would like to go, I should. We can take you in the carriage, and call round for Mrs. Doncastle on our way, and set you both down again coming back.'

'That would be excellent,' said Ethelberta. 'There is nowhere I like going to so much as the depths of the city. The absurd narrowness of world-renowned streets is so surprising—so crooked and shady as they are too, and full of the quaint smells of old cupboards and cellars. Walking through one of them reminds me of being at the bottom of some crevasse or gorge,

the proper surface of the globe being the tops of the houses.'

'You will come to take care of us, John? And you, Mr. Neigh, would like to come? We will tell Mr. Ladywell that he may join us if he cares to,' said Mrs. Belmaine.

'Oh, yes,' said her husband quietly; and Neigh said he should like nothing better, after a faint aspect of apprehension at the remoteness of the idea from the daily track of his thoughts. Mr. Belmaine observing this, and mistaking it for an indication that Neigh had been dragged into the party against his will by his overhasty wife, arranged that Neigh should go independently and meet them there at the hour named if he chose to do so, to give him an opportunity of staying away. Ethelberta also was by this time doubting if she had not been too eager with her proposal. To go on such a sentimental errand might be thought by her friends to be simply troublesome, their adherence having been given only in the regular course of complaisance. She was still comparatively an outsider here, her life with Lady Petherwin having been passed chiefly in alternations between English watering-places and continental towns. However, it was too late now to muse on this, and it may be added that from first to last Ethelberta never discovered from the Belmaines whether her proposal had been an infliction or a charm, so perfectly were they practised in sustaining that complete divorce

between thinking and saying which is the hall-mark of high civilisation. 'Between these and my poor crude Sol and Dan how great a gulf is fixed!' she said to herself, well knowing how plainly they would have grumbled at first if under such circumstances they had seen no pleasure to themselves in accompanying her, and on second thoughts how determined they would have been to go, on the moral ground of giving pleasure to her. The same result, it is true; but reached openly; and her heart naturally clung to the manners familiar to her in childhood, though impracticable now.

But, however she might doubt the Belmaines, she had no doubt as to Neigh's true sentiments: the time had come when he, notwithstanding his air of being oppressed by almost every lively invention of town and country for charming griefs to rest, would not be at all oppressed by a quiet visit to the purlieus of St. Giles's, Cripplegate, since she was the originator, and was going herself.

It was a bright hope-inspiring afternoon in this mid-May time when the carriage containing Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine, Mrs. Doncastle, and Ethelberta crept along the encumbered streets towards Barbican; till turning out of that thoroughfare into Redcross Street they beheld the bold shape of the old tower they sought, clothed in every neutral shade, standing clear against the sky, dusky and grim in its upper stage, and

hoary grey below, where every corner of every stone was completely rounded off by the waves of wind and storm.

All people were busy here : our visitors seemed to be the only idle persons the city contained ; and there was no dissonance—there never is—between antiquity and such beehive industry ; for pure industry, in failing to observe its own existence and aspect, partakes of the unobtrusive nature of material things. This intramural stir was a flywheel transparent by infinite motion, through which Milton and his day could be seen as if nothing intervened. Had there been ostensibly harmonious accessories, a crowd of observing people in search of the poetical, conscious of the place and the scene, what a discord would have arisen there ! But everybody passed by Milton's grave except Ethelberta and her friends, and for the moment the city's less invidious conduct appeared to her more respectful as a practice than her own.

But she was brought out of this rumination by the halt at the church door, and completely reminded of the present by finding the church open, and Neigh—the, till yesterday, unimpassioned Neigh—waiting in the vestibule to receive them, just as if he lived there. Ladywell had not arrived. It was a long time before Ethelberta could get back to Milton again, for Neigh was continuing to impend over her future more and more visibly. The objects along the journey had dis-

tracted her mind from him ; but the moment now was as a direct renewal and prolongation of the declaration-time yesterday, and as if in furtherance of the conclusion of the episode.

They all alighted and went in, the coachman being told to take the carriage to a quiet nook further on, and return in half-an-hour. Mrs. Belmaine and her carriage some years before had accidentally got jammed crosswise in Cheapside through the clumsiness of the man in turning up a side street, blocking that great artery of the civilised world for the space of a minute and a half, when they were pounced upon by half-a-dozen policemen and forced to back ignominiously up a little slit between the houses where they did not mean to go, amid the shouts of the drivers by ; and it was her nervous recollection of that event which caused Mrs. Belmaine to be so precise in her directions now.

By the time that they were grouped around the tomb the visit had assumed a much more solemn complexion than anyone among them had anticipated. Ashamed of the influence that she discovered Neigh to be exercising over her, and opposing it steadily, Ethelberta drew from her pocket a small edition of Milton, and proposed that she should read a few lines from 'Paradise Lost.' The responsibility of producing a successful afternoon was upon her shoulders ; she was, moreover, the only one present who could properly

manage blank verse, and this was sufficient to justify the proposal.

She stood with her head against the marble slab just below the bust, and began a selected 'piece, Neigh standing a few yards off on her right looking into his hat in order to listen accurately, Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine and Mrs. Doncastle seating themselves in a pew directly facing the monument. The ripe warm colours of afternoon came in upon them from the west, upon the sallow piers and arches, and the infinitely deep brown pews beneath, the aisle over Ethelberta's head being in misty shade through which glowed a lurid light from a dark-stained window behind. The sentences fell from her lips in a rhythmical cadence one by one, and she could be fancied a priestess of him before whose image she stood when with a vivid suggestiveness she delivered here, not many yards from the central money-mill of the world, yet out from the very tomb of their author, the passage containing the words

Mammon led them on ;
Mammon, the least erected spirit that fell
From heaven.

When she had finished reading Ethelberta left the monument, and then each one present strayed independently about the building, Ethelberta turning to the left along the passage to the south door. Neigh—from whose usually apathetic face and eyes there had proceeded a secret smouldering light as he listened and re-

garded her—followed in the same direction and vanished at her heels into the churchyard, whither she had now gone. Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine exchanged glances, and instead of following the pair they went with Mrs. Doncastle into the vestry to enquire of the person in charge for the register of the marriage of Oliver Cromwell, which was solemnised here. The church was now quite empty, and its stillness was as a vacuum into which an occasional noise from the street overflowed and became rarefied away to nothing.

Something like five minutes had passed when a hansom stopped outside the door, and Ladywell entered the porch. He stood still, and, looking enquiringly round for a minute or two, sat down in one of the high pews, as if under the impression that the others had not yet arrived.

While he sat here Neigh reappeared at the south door opposite, and came slowly in. Ladywell, in rising to go to him, saw that Neigh's attention was engrossed by something he held in his hand. It was his pocket-book, and Neigh was looking at a few loose flower-petals which had been placed between the pages. When Ladywell came forward Neigh looked up, started, and closed the book quickly, so that some of the petals fluttered to the ground between the two men. They were striped, red and white, and appeared to be leaves of the Harlequin rose.

‘Ah! here you are, Ladywell,’ he said, recovering

himself. 'We had given you up: my aunt said that you would not care to come. They are all in the vestry.' How it came to pass that Neigh designated those in the vestry as 'all,' when there was one in the churchyard, was a thing that he himself could hardly have explained, so much more had it to do with instinct than with calculation.

'Never mind them—don't interrupt them,' said Ladywell. 'The plain truth is that I have been very greatly disturbed in mind; and I could not appear earlier by reason of it. I had some doubt about coming at all.'

'I am sorry to hear that.'

'Neigh—I may as well tell you and have done with it. I have found that a lady of my acquaintance has two strings to her bow, or I am very much in error.'

'What—Mrs. Petherwin?' said Neigh, uneasily. 'But I thought that—that fancy was over with you long ago. Even your acquaintance with her was at an end, I thought.'

'In a measure it is at an end. But let me tell you that what you call a fancy has been anything but a fancy with me, to be over like a spring shower. To speak plainly, Neigh, I consider myself badly used by that woman; d—— badly used.'

'Badly used?' said Neigh, mechanically, and won-

dering all the time if Ladywell had been informed that Ethelberta was to be one of the party to-day.

‘Well, I ought not to talk like that,’ said Ladywell, adopting a lighter tone. ‘All is fair in courtship, I suppose, now as ever. Indeed, I mean to put a good face upon it: if I am beaten, I am. But it is very provoking, after supposing matters to be going on smoothly, to find out that you are quite mistaken.’

‘I told you you were quite mistaken in supposing she cared for you.’

‘That is just the point I was not mistaken in,’ said Ladywell, warmly. ‘She did care for me, and I stood as well with her as any man could stand until this fellow came, whoever he is. I sometimes feel so disturbed about it that I have a good mind to call upon her and ask his name. Wouldn’t you, Neigh? Will you accompany me?’

‘I would in a moment, but, but— I strongly advise you not to go,’ said Neigh, earnestly. ‘It would be rash, you know, and rather unmannerly; and would only hurt your feelings.’

‘Well, I am always ready to yield to a friend’s arguments A sneaking scamp, that’s what he is. Why does he not show himself?’

‘Don’t you really know who he is?’ said Neigh, in a pronounced and exceptional tone, on purpose to give Ladywell a chance of suspecting, for the position was getting awkward. But Ladywell was blind as

Bartimeus in that direction, so well had indifference to Ethelberta's charms been feigned by Neigh until he thought seriously of marrying her. Yet, unfortunately for the interests of calmness, Ladywell was less blind with his outward eye. In his reflections his glance had lingered again upon the pocket-book which Neigh still held in his hand, and upon the two or three rose-leaves on the floor, until he said idly, superimposing humorousness upon misery, as men in love can :

‘Rose-leaves, Neigh? I thought you did not care for flowers. What makes you amuse yourself with such sentimental objects as they, only fit for women, or painters like me? If I had not observed you with my own eyes I should have said that you were about the last man in the world to care for things of that sort. Whatever makes you keep rose-leaves in your pocket-book?’

‘The best reason on earth,’ said Neigh. ‘A woman gave them to me.’

‘That proves nothing unless she is a great deal to you,’ said Ladywell, with the experienced air of a man who, whatever his inferiority in years to Neigh, was far beyond him in knowledge of that sort, by virtue of his recent trials.

‘She is a great deal to me.’

‘If I did not know you to be such a confirmed misogynist I should say that this is a serious matter.’

‘It is serious,’ said Neigh quietly. ‘The probability is that I shall marry the woman who gave me these. Anyhow I have asked her the question, and she has not altogether said no.’

‘I am glad to hear it, Neigh,’ said Ladywell heartily. ‘I am glad to hear that your star is higher than mine.’

Before Neigh could make further reply Ladywell was attracted by the glow of green sunlight reflected through the south door by the grass of the churchyard, now in all its spring freshness and luxuriance. He bent his steps thither, followed anxiously by Neigh.

‘I had no idea there was such a lovely green spot in the city,’ Ladywell continued, passing out. ‘Trees, too, planted in the manner of an orchard. What a charming place!’

The place was truly charming just at that date. The untainted leaves of the lime and plane-trees and the newly-sprung grass had in the sun a brilliancy of beauty that was brought into extraordinary prominence by the sable soil showing here and there, and the charcoaled stems and trunks out of which the leaves budded: they seemed an importation, not a produce, and their delicacy such as would perish in a day.

‘What is this round tower?’ Ladywell said again, walking towards the iron-grey bastion, partly covered with ivy and Virginia creeper, which stood obtruding into the enclosure.

‘Oh, didn’t you know that was here? That’s a piece of the old city wall,’ said Neigh, looking furtively around at the same time. Behind the bastion the churchyard ran into a long narrow strip, grassed like the other part, but completely hidden from it by the cylinder of ragged masonry. On rounding this projection, Ladywell beheld within a few feet of him a lady whom he knew too well.

‘Mrs. Petherwin here!’ exclaimed he, proving how ignorant he had been of the composition of the party he was to meet, and accounting at the same time for his laxity in attending it.

‘I forgot to tell you,’ said Neigh awkwardly, behind him, ‘that Mrs. Petherwin was to come with us.’

Ethelberta’s look was somewhat blushful and agitated, as if from some late transaction: she appeared to have been secluding herself there till she should have recovered her equanimity. However, she came up to him and said, ‘I did not see you before this moment: we had been thinking you would not come.’

While these words were being prettily spoken, Ladywell’s face became pale as death. On Ethelberta’s bosom were the stem and green calyx of a rose, almost all its flower having disappeared. It had been a Harlequin rose, for two or three of its striped leaves remained to tell the tale.

She could not help noticing his fixed gaze, and she said quickly, ‘Yes, I have lost my pretty rose: this

may as well go now,' and she plucked the stem from its fastening in her dress and flung it away.

Poor Ladywell turned round to meet Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine, whose voices were beginning to be heard just within the church door, leaving Neigh and Ethelberta together. It was a graceful act of young Ladywell's that, in the midst of his own pain at the strange tale the rose-leaves suggested—Neigh's rivalry, Ethelberta's mutability, his own defeat—he was not regardless of the intense embarrassment which might have been caused had he remained.

The two were silent at first, and it was evident that Ethelberta's mood was one of anger at something that had gone before. She turned aside from him to follow the others, when Neigh spoke in a tone somewhat bitter and somewhat stern.

'What—going like that? After being compromised together, why don't you close with me? Ladywell knows all: I had already told him that the rose-leaves were given me by my intended wife. We seem to him to be practising deceptions all of a piece, and what folly it is to play off so! As to what I did, that I ask your forgiveness for.'

Ethelberta looked upon the ground and maintained a compressed lip. Neigh resumed: 'If I showed more feeling than you care for, I insist that it was not more than was natural under the circumstances, if not quite proper. Opinions may differ, but my experience goes

to prove that conventional squeamishness at such times as these is more talked and written about than practised. Plain behaviour must be expected when marriage is the question. Nevertheless, I do say—and I cannot say more—that I am sincerely sorry to have offended you by exceeding my privileges. I will never do so again.'

'Don't say privileges. You have none.'

'I am sorry that I thought otherwise, and that others will think so too. Ladywell is, at any rate, bent on thinking so. . . . It might have been made known to him in a gentle way—but God disposes.'

'There is nothing to make known—I don't understand,' said Ethelberta, going from him.

By this time Ladywell had walked round the gravel walks with the two other ladies and Mr. Belmaine, and they were all turning to come back again. The young painter had deputed his voice to reply to their remarks, but his understanding continued poring upon other things. When he came up to Ethelberta, his agitation had left him: she too was free from constraint; while Neigh was some distance off, carefully examining nothing in particular in an old fragment of wall.

The little party was now united again as to its persons; though in spirit far otherwise. They went through the church in general talk, Ladywell sad but serene, and Ethelberta keeping far-removed both from him and from Neigh. She had at this juncture entered

upon that Sphinx-like stage of existence in which, contrary to her earlier manner, she signified to no one of her ways, plans, or sensations, and spoke little on any subject at all. There were occasional smiles now which came only from the face, and speeches from the lips merely.

The journey home was performed as they had come, Ladywell not accepting the seat in Neigh's cab which was phlegmatically offered him. Mrs. Doncastle's acquaintance with Ethelberta had been slight until this day; but the afternoon's proceeding had much impressed the matron with her younger friend. Before they parted she said, with the sort of affability which is meant to signify the beginning of permanent friendship: 'A friend of my husband's, Lord Mountclere, has been anxious for some time to meet you. He is a great admirer of the poems, and more still of the story-telling invention, and your power in it. He has been present many times at the Mayfair Hall to hear you. When will you dine with us to meet him? I know you will like him. Will Thursday be convenient?'

Ethelberta stood for a moment reflecting, and reflecting hoped that Mrs. Doncastle had not noticed her momentary perplexity. Crises were becoming as common as blackberries; and she had foreseen this one a long time. It was not that she was to meet Lord Mountclere, for he was only a name and a distant profile to her: it was that her father would necessarily

be present at the meeting, in the most anomalous position that human nature could endure.

However, having often proved in her disjointed experience that the shortest way out of a difficulty lies straight through it, Æthelberta decided to dine at the Doncastles', and, as she murmured that she should have great pleasure in meeting any friend of theirs, set about contriving how the encounter with her dearest relative might be made safe and unsuspected. She bade them adieu blithely; but the thoughts engendered by the invitation stood before her as sorrowful and rayless ghosts which could not be laid. Often at such conjunctures as these, when the futility of her great undertaking was more than usually manifest, did Æthelberta long like a tired child for the conclusion of the whole matter; when her work should be over, and the evening come; when she might draw her boat upon the shore, and in some thymy nook await eternal night with a placid mind.

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